The A levels' Resit Policy and its Effect on Student Learning in Three Educational Institutions in England

An investigation into the practice of students resitting examinations in A levels in three educational institutions in England with a view to exploring the implications of the A levels' resit policy for student learning in sixth-form education

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Declaration

This thesis is my own work and no part of it has been previously submitted for a degree at this, or any other university.

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To my husband, Tony, and sons, James and Michael.

Summary

This thesis is a qualitative study of the implications of the resit policy of A levels for student learning in sixth-form education in England. In contrast to many other high-stakes examinations which test students only at the end of a course, A levels use a modular format where students are allowed to resit past units within the two-year sixth-form course with no limit or penalty. Since resits were introduced extensively to A levels ten years ago, the A-level results have been improving steadily. Every year, without fail, there are reports of another 'best-ever' A levels. Yet, instead of national elation, there is mistrust, suspicion and doubt about rising standards amid allegations of grade inflation; resits are seen as the key reason for the big increases in A-level results.

The research adopts an interpretivistic approach, based on the accounts of students and academic staff from three sixth-form educational institutions and university admissions tutors at two universities in England. It explores the practice of resits in sixth-form education, including how students make resit decisions, how they improve in the resit, how resits affect student learning, what impact resits have on the certification and selection roles of A levels, and how students of differing learner identity approach the resit challenge. It contends that, due to a lack of appreciation of the rationale behind the resit policy, no control of resits and the highly competitive nature of selection by universities, the A levels' resit policy has resulted in some educationally undesirable practices in sixth-form education. Only those who adopt a positive approach to resits, have help from their teachers and work hard to improve their learning and skills gain from the system and these conditions are differentially available to students. For the others, the resit system has resulted in an over-emphasis on A levels in sixth-form education, which involves taking examinations early through rushed teaching, elaborate resit strategies, dubious revision tactics and reliance on second chances. All these contribute to warping students' understanding of what counts as valid knowledge or what it means to learn. The resit system has accentuated the examination-oriented culture in sixth-form education and has resulted in an increased focus on extrinsic rewards, performance goals and a surface approach to learning, which may ill-equip students for success at university or for life-long learning.

The research aims to demonstrate how a well-intentioned policy for a high-stakes examination can have unintended consequences when it comes to actual practice in the classroom. It concludes that in developing educational and assessment policies, due consideration needs to be given to their implications for student learning and their impact on education as a whole.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

A levels	Advanced Level examinations of the General Certificate of Education
A2	A2 is the second tier (worth 50 per cent) of an A level qualification
ALIS	Advanced Level Information System ALIS is a target setting system run by the CEM centre at Durham University. According to its website (http://www.bridgewaterhigh.com), it is used by over a third of all sixth-form providers to calculate subject-specific and up-to-date targets for both AS and A2 level based on a student's GCSE average score.
Alps	A Levels Performance System Alps is an application system which provides analysis on A and AS levels to schools and colleges. According to its website (http://www.alps-va.co.uk), it produces analytical reports to schools and colleges on their performance against a national benchmark.
AQA	Assessment and Qualifications Alliance AQA is one of the UK's awarding body offering GCSE and A levels qualifications as well as other academic and vocational qualifications.
AS	Advanced Subsidiary AS is the first tier (worth 50 per cent) of an A level qualification and is also a stand-alone qualification in A levels.
AVCE	Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education
Cambridge Assessment	*Cambridge Assessment* is the examination group for the University of Cambridge, comprising three exam boards: University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE), University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (Cambridge ESOL) and OCR (Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations).
Civitas	Institute for the Study of Civil Society Civitas is an independent 'think tank' in the UK.
CSE	Certificate of Secondary Education
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
Edexcel	'Educational Excellence' Edexcel is one of the UK's awarding body offering GCSE and A levels qualifications as well as other academic and vocational qualifications.
EMA	Education Maintenance Allowance
FE	Further Education

GCE	General Certificate of Education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
HE	Higher Education
HKEAA	Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority
JCQ	Joint Council for Qualifications
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OCR	Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations OCR is one of the UK's awarding body offering GCSE and A levels qualifications as well as other academic and vocational qualifications.
Ofqual	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
QCDA	Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency
SAT	Standard Assessment Tasks
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service UCAS is the organization responsible for managing applications to higher education courses in the UK.
UMS	Uniform Mark Scale UMS converts raw marks into uniform marks in AS and A-levels. A full 6-unit A level has 600 UMS; a full 4-unit A level has 400 UMS and a full 2-unit AS has 200 UMS. Grade A is 80% of the full UMS; B, 70%; C, 60%, D, 50% and E, 40%.
VCE	Vocational Certificate of Education

1 Introduction

1.1 Outline of the research

This thesis is a qualitative study of the implications of the A levels' resit policy for student learning in sixth-form education in England. The research adopts an interpretivistic approach, based on the accounts of students and academic staff from three educational institutions and admissions tutors at two universities in England. The educational institutions include one sixth-form college, one further-education college and one independent school with a sixth-form. The objective of the research is to explore the practice of resits in A levels in the three educational institutions and its effect on their students' learning.

1.2 Writing and researcher's identity

Examinations are a research area of great interest to me. They have been my life's work; I spent over twenty years running public examinations in Hong Kong. Before describing the research context and rationale, I want to highlight the relationship between researcher's identity and the representation of research findings, a point to bear in mind when reading the research report.

When researchers put in writing the findings of their research, they are presenting their version of the subject of research using their interpretation and in their own words. Writing, thus, is integral to interpretation and representation. Dunne, Pryor and Yates (2005, p.131) suggest that it is writing that "supports representation of the real, and via verisimilitude, the truth". Increasingly, it is recognized that there is a strong power relationship between the textual production and representation of the social world (Coffey, 2002). For instance, George Orwell (1937), from a fairly privileged background, described the English working class of the 1930s in *The Road to Wigan Pier* as disgustingly filthy whereas a more prosaic Bill Bryson (1993) in a more recent book, *Notes from a Small Island,* wryly points out that they were in fact obsessed with cleanliness.

Writing is also about analysis, which is a fundamental element of research and social observation. Sometimes, analysts "seem to reveal as much about themselves as their analysand" (Haigh, 2010, p.69) [1]. The researcher's identity plays a significant part in the data production and analysis, which are then reflected in the writing. In other words, in addition to the propositional knowledge (knowledge expressed in language form), it is equally important for readers to be aware of the tacit knowledge (the intuitive), which mirrors the value patterns of the researcher (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

1.3 My background

I came from a traditional, middle-class Chinese family in Hong Kong. My father was an accountant and my mother, a housewife. My primary and secondary education was largely dominated by a culture whose focus was on test and examination results rather than being interested in learning per se. Nobody ever asked me what I was interested in or wanted to do, the typical view being that teachers and parents knew best. Pending changes effective in 2012, the education and examination system in Hong Kong has followed the English system fairly closely (Hong Kong being an English colony prior to 1997), with a Certification of Education examination (GCSE equivalent) and an Advanced Level examination (A levels equivalent)[2]. Because I was 'good with numbers', I was encouraged to study mathematics and sciences in sixth-form and went on to read Mathematics and Statistics at the University of Hong Kong in the 1970s. Throughout my pre-university education, learning was very much examination-driven and there was little time for reading outside the examination subjects. My understanding of the meaning of education and my interest in reading broadened only while I was in university, ironically not from attending lectures on mathematics, but by staying in a residential hall surrounded by girls, the majority of whom read English, Literature, Psychology, Sociology and other humanities subjects. While I still enjoyed studying mathematics and statistics, I remember spending most of my free time reading D.H. Lawrence, Graham Greene, Jane Austen, Emily Brontë and Charlotte Brontë, so that I could join in my friends' interesting conversations and discussion with our hall

[1] The analysis refers to differences in the comments made by a coach and a cricket star about the English cricketer Kevin Pietersen during the Ashes in 2010.

[2] The two examinations will be replaced by the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) examination in 2012 (HKEAA, 2010).

warden, an English professor who encouraged me to read more. Those three years in university showed me the fun of reading and learning outside solving mathematical problems.

After graduation, I worked for a couple of years as a systems analyst before joining the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) as a statistics officer. During my career in the HKEAA, my world continued mainly to involve numbers, but dealing with people, particularly teachers and students, was an essential part of my job, especially in the last eight years as the deputy head of HKEAA. I became more aware of the 'human faces' behind the marks, grades and statistics. That could be a reason why I opted to use a largely qualitative approach based on people's experience rather than a pure quantitative study in doing the research for this thesis.

During the early years of my career in the HKEAA in the 1980s, grading of public examinations was largely norm-referencing. The cutting scores of all the grades were determined by pre-set percentages of a control group (as the link to compare and maintain standards between years). The yearly grading meetings were routine and brief, with very little leeway for the board or examiners to deviate from the grading policy. But, when it came to decisions about 'examination irregularities', such as suspected cheating or special consideration for students who claimed to be sick on the day of examination, the board then spent hours discussing every single case. I used to think it ironic that we could be so careful with cases of individual students because we knew that our decision affected them significantly, yet we left the grading process, which affected a much greater number of students, to a mechanical process based almost solely on statistics. Eventually, with increasing emphasis on standard-referenced grading in the 1990s, a more flexible system was adopted by the HKEAA and more weight was then given to examiners' judgement.

During my years at the HKEAA, I witnessed much progress and development in educational assessment, not only in Hong Kong but also in other countries, including the UK. Instead of being secretive, examining boards nowadays provide a lot more transparency in how they work and have a much closer working relationship with schools and other stakeholders. Yet, there remain many issues in the relationship

between examinations and education, for which there never seems to be satisfactory solutions. A typical example is the focus on drill-and-practice instructions in schools to prepare students for examinations rather than an emphasis on teaching students how to learn (Madaus, Russell and Higgins, 2009). One 'extreme' example in my experience in Hong Kong was the use of 'memorized' essays in English compositions. Instead of learning how to write using their own words and style, students were taught to memorize a number of 'exemplar' essays, which were 'suitable' for different types of composition questions, so that they could regurgitate them in the examination. The practice, although not widespread, was common enough that my office used to, and probably still does, train examiners to spot these 'memorized' essays. So, instead of learning 'how to write', students are taught 'what to write'. When I left Hong Kong a few years ago to live in England, I decided to pursue my interest in research and to find out more about issues relating to some of the backwash effects of examinations on student learning.

1.4 Research context and rationale

A levels are high-stakes examinations for 16-19 year olds in England; they are taken up by about 40 per cent of those who continue in full-time post-16 education (Pring et. al., 2009). They certify the students' achievement in sixth-form education and help universities and employers select candidates. Based on recent records, A levels appear to be fairly successful in both roles. They have remained the chief selection tool for university admissions (Hodgson, Spours and Waring, 2005; Bassett et al., 2009). At the same time, A-level results have risen consistently over the past decade (JCQ, 2001-2009). Every year, without fail, there are reports of another 'best-ever' A levels. Yet, instead of national elation, there is mistrust, suspicion and doubt about rising standards amid allegations of 'grade inflation' (de Waal and Cowen, 2007a; ACS, 2009).

The basis of the public's concerns is largely related to the corrupting effects of high-stakes examinations, such as over emphasis on examination preparation and instrumentalized learning (Madaus, 1988; Torrance, 2007), and A levels are no exception. The difference with A levels is that, in contrast to many other examinations which test students only at the end of a course, A levels now use a modular format where students are allowed to resit past units within the two-year sixth-form course

without any limit or penalty. It has been suggested that the current modular system may be easier than the previous linear A levels because there is no terminal examination check of students' synoptic grasp of the subject (Young and Leney, 1997). The main concern, however, lies with the resit feature of the modular system, which many believe is the key reason for the 'grade inflation' in A-level results. The UK government has insisted that the improvement reflects better teaching and learning as well as clearer information about assessment objectives and criteria from A level awarding bodies (DfES, 2008). The general perception, however, remains that if students are allowed to resit over and over again, they will inevitably get better at taking examinations, but the improvement in grades does not necessarily imply a commensurate improvement in standards (de Waal, 2009).

The limit on the number of resits in A levels was removed in 2003 by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), now the QCDA (Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency). According to the statement of QCA (2003, p.1): "this simplification of the resit rules will significantly reduce the bureaucratic burden on schools, colleges and awarding bodies; it will have a minimal effect on the number of students who take resits". The resit policy was later reviewed by the QCA in 2007 (QCA, 2007a). That review suggests that the majority of students did better in resits but there was no evidence of resits being over-used by students. The QCA research report, on which the review was based, however, contained no detailed analysis of the students' improvement nor did it examine the effect of resits on student learning. Following the review, the QCA decided to continue with the unlimited resit rule and further simplified the 'cash-in' rule so that students no longer need to decline the AS grades previously attained when they resit. The new arrangement means that the best grade will always apply or, as the QCA (2007a, para.16) report puts it, "there is no gamble associated with resitting units". Information given to students about resits by other bodies also seems to paint a 'nothing to lose' picture. An example, taken from the website of Edexcel, an A levels awarding body, is given below:

> Although it can feel like it, underachieving in an exam is not the end of the world. Resitting is a real possibility - giving you the chance to get the grades you want or need.
>
> Edexcel (n.d.)

The information mentions only the immediate or more observable effect of resits; i.e. the possibility of improvement in results, but omits the fuller picture of other implications, such as additional workload and examination pressure.

1.5 Objective of the research

The objective of this research is to investigate how sixth-form students in England make use of resits and how that affects their learning. Bulmer (1977) points out that meaningful research is more than a simple assembly of facts; it entails understanding, interpreting, developing, exploring or testing the theories and ideas about the social relationships and structures underneath the social facts. As Bierstedt (1977, p. 52) puts it: "we do not construct sociological theories in order to learn something about the rooming-house district in Chicago, but study the rooming-house district in order to contribute to our understanding of the nature of urban societies". The 2007 QCA review, in my view, is largely descriptive, with an emphasis on examination results and administration logistics.

Fielding (1988, p.13) argues that one way to see macro-level phenomena is to view them "as summary 'representations' which are actively constructed and oriented to by people in micro-episodes". As will be discussed in Chapter 3, I adopted an 'actor-oriented' approach in this research, based on the first-hand experience of resits of some sixth-form students. By focusing on a small number of students in an in-depth study, I aim to go beyond asking about resit numbers or whether resits produce better results but raise the question of how resits affect student learning in terms of making choices, approaches to learning and the motivation to learn.

The research questions for this thesis are:

> How do English students make use of resits in A levels during sixth-form education and what are the effects of resits on student learning?

The research investigates how students make use of resits, what kind of advice and support they receive from their teachers and school or college, how resits affect their learning in the classroom, what impact resits have on the effectiveness of A levels in

their certification and selection roles, and how the resit experience affects the students' learning dispositions and learner identity.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

I will start the discussion with a literature review in Chapter 2, which examines the general roles of examinations in education, the history of A levels and the current modular resit system, the expansion of higher education in England and some theories of student motivation. Chapter 3 describes the methodology, including the research strategy, the research questions, the research design and the research methods. Explanations will be given as to why I used qualitative research based on an interpretivistic approach for the investigation and how I chose the research participants. Chapter 4 focuses on data production and analysis, with a discussion of some of the characteristics of questionnaires and interviews and how I used them in the research. Some of the limitations and potential bias in data production and analysis are also highlighted. The findings of the research are contained under four themes in Chapters 5 to 8: the students' resit actions, the students' resit practices, the impact of resits on the effectiveness of A levels, and the relationship between the students' resit behaviour and their learner identity. In conclusion, Chapter 9 gives an overview of the key findings of the research, a reflection on the research process, a discussion of the relationship between research, policy and practice, and what contribution this research may make to the education community.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

A literature review serves several purposes (Creswell, 2009). It gives a framework for establishing the importance of the research, provides an account of what has been published on the research topic and gives a benchmark for comparing the results of the research to other findings. Before I write about the main findings of the literature review, I will outline briefly my search strategy.

2.2 Search strategy

My search strategy is fairly wide, including journals, books, conference papers, government publications, documents of awarding bodies, media reports and public surveys.

There are plenty of books and publications on examinations. Specialists, such as Patricia Broadfoot, Caroline Gipps, Paul Black, Dylan Wiliam and George Madaus, have written extensively on assessment and examinations, in particular, their roles in teaching and learning. Some of these books also mention the effect of examinations on student motivation. Specifically on theories of motivation, I refer largely to literature by Carol Dweck, Edward Deci, Paul Pintrich and Noel Entwistle. The most relevant material to my research comes from Ann Hodgson, Ken Spours and their colleagues at the Institute of Education, University of London. Their research focuses on 14-19 education and training, policy on post-compulsory education, curriculum and qualifications reforms and, specifically useful for this research, the more recent developments in A levels.

When it comes to academic research specifically on the resit policy of A levels, however, not a lot is available. This could be due to the narrow focus: it is essentially one feature of an examination system, albeit a controversial one. When the term, 'A-level resits' or 'A-level re-sits', was used in February 2010 in the University of Sussex

QuickSearch facility, which includes major educational electronic journal databases[3], only 21 articles (six if 're-sits' was used) were located, and only two of them were vaguely relevant. I have, therefore, widened the scope of the search; the key words used are: A levels, assessment, modular, resits and sixth-form education. I search mainly within peer-reviewed journals specifically on education and assessment[4]. The articles I find most useful and relevant are those on the *Curriculum 2000* reform. Searches using other key words, including university entrance examinations, formative and summative assessment, student motivation, high-stakes examinations and educational policy, are also made to locate related literature in terms of the effect of high-stakes examinations on student learning. Apart from books and journals, conference papers also provide a good source of information, particularly those on educational policies.

Contrary to the limited results in academic research, the search for A levels resits in the public domain is much more productive. A Google search on 'A-level resits' in March 2010 yielded 147,000 results. Obviously, the majority of these are irrelevant (many are advertisements for tutorial colleges), but it is clear from the search results that the modular approach of A levels and its resit arrangements have aroused much interest in the media and education sector in England. This is largely because the new system is a departure from the 50-year-long, traditional linear approach of A levels, and resits are seen by many as the main reason for the rise in A-level results in recent years. There are plenty of media reports, newspaper comments and feature articles on resits. The online newspaper reports are useful as they make tidy and easily retrievable records compared to actual newspapers cuttings. Apart from media reports, surveys, such as those funded by independent 'think-tanks' (e.g. Civitas, Reform), are also relevant and useful.

The internet is very convenient when searching for information about policies and practice. In terms of policies, websites of government and public bodies, such as the Department for Education (DfE), the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA), the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)

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[3] Including: ASSIA, British Education Index, ERIC, JSTOR, Web of Science, Sage Journals Online

[4] Journals include: Assessment in Education, British Educational Research and Journal, British Journal of Educational Studies, Journal of Education Policy and Oxford Review of Education.

and A level awarding bodies (namely, Edexcel, AQA, OCR), are the obvious places to start. Information on some of these websites, however, changes fairly frequently (as does their name, e.g. from DfES to DCSF and DfE; from QCA to QCDA, etc.). For instance, many of the QCA documents on resits which were available on its website in early 2008 when I wrote the research proposal, are no longer kept ('pages not found') on the updated website under its new identity, QCDA. Keeping records of the information retrieved together with the access dates has been, therefore, important. I also use the internet for searches on information about practices of schools (e.g. resit guidelines) and universities (e.g. entrance requirements).

2.3 Critical appraisal strategy

There has been much negative press about the resit policy of A levels. One obviously needs to be careful when reading criticisms in the media as, very often, news stories tend to be sensationalized and the arguments presented in some analysis can be heavily one-sided. On the whole, the English media seem to be fairly consistent with their reporting of the A-level situation and usually include in their reports perspectives from different parties, including government, public bodies and educationalists.

The heading or abstract of some research reports can sometimes be misleading; their title may seem promising but the contents may suggest something else. For instance, when examining the quality of A levels, one may feel reassured with the overall findings of a research study (Ipsos MORI, 2010), which indicate a very favourable perception of A levels among teachers, students, parents and the public. Looking deeper into the report, however, it becomes clear that the confidence in A levels referred to in the report is about quality of A levels in marking and grading only, and does not address issues such as whether A levels meet the learning objectives of sixth-form education (i.e. more about reliability than validity). Another example is that most of the published research on student motivation focuses on young children or undergraduates and care needs to be taken when applying the underlying theories to motivation of sixth-form students due to the age difference and different expectations of the students. Finally, public examinations involve political, economic and social elements, and these need to be taken into account when reviewing the literature, such as the relationship

between the need to broaden access in post-16 education on the one hand and worries about dilution of standards on the other.

2.4 Review as a continual process

Patton (2002, p. 226) points out that there are trade-offs in reviewing the literature at the beginning of qualitative research because "it may bias the researcher's thinking and reduce openness to whatever emerges in the field". He proposes alternatives of reviewing the literature simultaneously with fieldwork and afterwards. While agreeing that the literature review should be a continual process, as it has been for this research, I also think it essential to conduct a fairly comprehensive literature review at the beginning in order to understand as much as possible what is already known or published about the research topic, albeit with an open mind.

The literature review at the beginning of the research is both chronological (e.g. the history of A levels) and thematic (e.g. roles of examinations in society). Later on, when I started theorizing from the data generated, the literature review became more thematic, such as the theories of student motivation.

2.5 List of areas reviewed

The literature review covers the following areas:

- the different roles of public examinations in society;
- the history of A levels;
- the development of 14-19 qualifications in England;
- widening participation in post-16 and higher education in England;
- the current structure of A levels including the modular approach and resit policy;
- different responses to the continuing rise in A-level results over the past decade;
- the general attitudes of schools, colleges and universities towards resits in A levels;
- the effect of high-stakes public examinations on student learning in general;
- general theories of student motivation and approaches to learning.

Each area is expanded upon below. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key review findings and a reflection on how the review influenced the way I approached the research.

2.6 Public examinations and their roles in society

2.6.1 Public examinations as a form of assessment

Public examinations are a form of assessment. The term 'assessment' comes from the Latin word *assidēre* which means to sit beside: "a meaning that evokes a rather sympathetic picture of the activity as one in which the tutor sits beside a child, guiding his or her learning" (Kellaghan, 2001, p3). Today, educational assessment is rarely done on a one-on-one basis, but conducted in groups: small groups in classroom tests or large groups in national assessment. Assessment, as it occurs in the classroom, the school and across the country, is continual and frequent and has become an integral part of the teaching and learning process (Broadfoot, 1996).

There are many forms and use of educational assessment, including formal or informal, formative or summative, internal or external, continuous or terminal, diagnostic or descriptive and convergent or divergent (Black, 1998; Weeden, Winter and Broadfoot, 2002). The use of the term can be confusing if the kind of assessment being referred to, the purpose of the assessment or the context in which the assessment is being used is not made clear (Cizek, 1997). My focus in the research and in this literature review is on summative, external assessment in the form of a public or national examination during or at the end of a particular stage of education, of which A levels are a typical example.

2.6.2 Selection role of public examinations

Public or national examinations have a long history (Gipps and Stobart, 1990; Black, 1998; Lambert and Lines, 2000). They were used in the Han Dynasty in Imperial China as an open and fair way of recruiting civil servants from all walks of life rather than through patronage or nepotism. For similar reasons, examinations for public recruitment were introduced in Britain in 1855 to cater for an expanding civil service. In education, the University of London matriculation examination was established in 1838. Oxford and Cambridge soon followed with their own university entrance examinations in 1857. Gipps and Stobart (1990, p.3) point out that "examinations did not develop in a vacuum: examinations developed in response to the particular needs and requirements of the time". Based on the historical evidence, it appears that public

examinations were introduced almost invariably to meet the need for selection. The reason for this could be that in most societies, different ranges of competences are sought and there is a need for selection for different social roles. Examinations provide this 'rite of passage' as a rational basis to discriminate between individuals for selection to various employment or higher education (Broadfoot, 1996).

2.6.3 Certification role of public examinations

Another common function of public examinations is certification. According to Eggleston (1984), it has been a long tradition in society to recognize people's capability or attainment in important and responsible social roles through social status and power. In earlier societies, opportunities for such recognition tended to be contained within closed circles, usually ascribed to by caste, estate or class. Eggleston (1984, p. 17) observes that the task of examinations then was "to legitimate the incumbent in the role rather than to select". Formal and open qualifying examinations were introduced in 1815 for the medical profession in England (Gipps and Stobart, 1990). Today, similar certifying examinations are widespread, from qualifications for professions such as accounting, banking and law to certifications for technicians and skilled crafters. The biggest scale of certification of all is associated with the mass schooling system, which began in the nineteenth century under the new economic, social and political conditions of an emerging fully-industrialized world (Broadfoot, 1996). In order to provide objective and reliable information to the outsiders about the learning that has taken place in classrooms and schools, some form of external assessment is needed and public examinations provide that information.

2.6.4 Evaluation role of public examinations

Apart from selection and certification, there is another role of examinations in education: the evaluation or monitoring role. Black (1986) observes that the monitoring use of assessment is nothing new: teachers have always taken account of learning difficulties in the classroom and reacted to them. The focus is on promotion of learning through the provision of feedback. Public examinations do a similar job of taking account of student learning, but on a much bigger scale and for a different purpose: evaluating and monitoring the students' standards. In a way, students in education can be said to have always been monitored, both internally and externally. The importance

of the evaluation role of public examinations has received more attention only in recent decades, when the monitoring applies not only to students, but also to teachers, schools and systems (Goldstein and Lewis, 1996; Kellaghan, 2001).

2.6.5 Increasing involvement of government in education and examinations

According to Broadfoot (1984), traditionally, the English preoccupation with public examinations was due to a relatively weak central control of education and a correspondingly strong tradition of teacher autonomy, resulting in central government needing and relying on external, public examinations to evaluate and maintain standards and to provide some measure of curriculum uniformity. The situation has changed over the years as the UK government increased its involvement in and control of all aspects of education through setting up a national curriculum, establishing quasi-autonomous educational agencies, such as QCDA and Ofqual, and putting in place an accountability system based on examination league tables and a tight employment system for the teaching profession (Lambert and Lines, 2000). Government's concern about control and accountability is perhaps understandable; after all, government, past or present, is concerned about control, political accountability, and the vote.

According to Linn (1995), public examinations have always had great appeal for policymakers because they can be externally mandated, can be rapidly changed and have visible results. This feature of 'visible results' in examinations is particularly crucial. It seems that if there is a need to provide some evidence of learning at the end of a critical stage in education, people would rather trust a transparent and standardized system (despite its technical restrictions) than results produced by individual systems or schools. It has been argued that public examinations have become a powerful mechanism by which those in power legitimize their control (Foucault, 1977; Broadfoot, 1996). Students are controlled by being perpetually assessed and classified. Teachers and school heads are controlled by the accountability system. Ironically, government itself is also evaluated by the same examination yardstick, against which the effectiveness of its educational policies is measured. Government has been accused in the past of trying to interfere with the system to 'fix' standards; an example was the 2002 A levels, when allegations were made about government putting pressure on

awarding bodies to tighten up grading scores of some A-level results in order to depress pass rates in the new A levels (Hodgson and Spours, 2008).

2.7 The history of A levels

Traditionally, educators adopted broadly two views towards the function of secondary education (Howarth, 1991; Cockett, 1996). At one extreme, there is the general, often called 'liberal', view of education for education's sake and, on the other, the vocational or utilitarian view. The 'liberal' emphasis in English education can be traced back to 1911, when a consultative committee appointed by the government recommended that there should be an examination for 16 year olds and another for 18 year olds and that these examinations (which came to be known as General Certificate of Education, or GCE) should be a test of liberal education (Graves, 1988). The examination for the 18 year olds eventually became A levels in 1951.

A levels are short for Advanced Level examinations and they test students at a more advanced level than the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations or, previously, the O levels (Ordinary levels) in GCE. A levels are single-subject examinations; i.e. awarding bodies examine subjects, not the curriculum (Young and Leney, 1997). Prior to 2000, the traditional A levels used a linear structure in which students took, on average, two to three subjects over a two-year sixth-form course and sat each subject in a one-off, external examination at the end of the course[5]. Students' results are graded from A to E[6]. A-level courses are offered in schools with sixth-forms (state schools or independent schools), sixth-form colleges and further-education (FE) colleges and about 80 A-level subjects are available in 2010 (Directgov, n.d.a, n.d.b). The A-level curriculum refers to a programme of study offered by a school or college, from which its students choose, study and take A-level subject examinations at the end of it. Due to the small number of subjects taken by sixth-form students, A levels have always been criticized for their narrow curriculum.

[5] Some subjects may have an internally assessed coursework component.

[6] Failed results are shown as grade U ("unclassified"); A* grades were introduced in 2010.

Over the years, much effort has been spent by the UK government to tackle the question of over-specialization in A levels, but generally to no avail (Broadfoot, 1996; Higham, Sharp and Yeomans, 1996; Young and Leney, 1997). Attempts to broaden the sixth-form curriculum could be dated back to the 1960s when a two-stage system, based on Q (Qualifying) and F (Further) examinations, was proposed to replace A levels. That proposal was defeated in 1970, mainly due to fears by examining boards and universities of possible dilution of standards and worries in the teaching profession about the effect of an extra level of examination on the school curriculum. A subsequent proposal of N (Normal) and F (Further) levels was similarly defeated. Another proposal of I (intermediate) level was introduced in 1977; it was eventually implemented in the form of Advanced-Supplementary levels in 1987. However, the Advanced-Supplementary levels failed to take off, forming only one in every 15 A-level qualifications, chiefly because universities still demanded full A-level grades and the examinations themselves were hard work, more like two-thirds than one-half of an A level, and there were difficulties for schools to timetable them alongside A levels (Higham, 2003; Hodgson and Spours, 2003). They were also outflanked by changes in A levels themselves with the advent of new subject areas and syllabuses, many of which were inter-disciplinary in nature and used a modular approach to learning and assessment, which turned out to be popular with schools and colleges.

2.8 Development of 14-19 qualifications in England

2.8.1 The triple-track qualifications framework

Calls for reforms of a more structural nature to A levels started in the 1990s, during which A levels were drawn into a wider debate about the future of 14-19 education in England amid various attempts to establish some kind of a framework to encompass both academic and vocational qualifications (Higham, Sharp and Yeoman, 1996; Hodgson et al., 2004). The need for reform was necessary at the time, as full-time post-16 participation rose rapidly from under 50 per cent in 1987 to 70 per cent in 1994. The expansion was chiefly a result of two changes (Hodgson and Spours, 1997, 2003). The first was the positive effect of the introduction of GCSE, a common 16^{+} examination which replaced the previous O levels and the Certificate of Secondary Education

(CSE)[7]. The second was initiatives by government in creating vocational qualifications, which were used to cater for the group of young people who could neither gain O or A levels nor enter a shrinking youth labour market or apprenticeship. A more concerted effort by government to shape the education and training system proactively and holistically was apparent in the 1991 White Paper, *Education and Training for the 21st Century*. In it, a triple-track national qualifications framework was proposed, based on an academic track (A levels), a broad vocational track (GNVQs) and an occupationally specific track (NVQs). According to Hodgson and Spours (1997, 2003), the new vocational qualifications, particularly the GNVQs, were more a reactive response by government to broaden access to post-16 study than a proactive incentive of government to raise achievement; the implementation of the GNVQs was criticized generally for its assessment regime, bureaucracy and initial low completion rates.

2.8.2 *Curriculum 2000* reforms

The necessity for a major review of the qualifications for 16-19 year olds soon became apparent, resulting in the Dearing Review in 1996 (Dearing, 1996). Unlike the 1991 White Paper, the Dearing report recommended a more accessible and clearer national qualifications framework by stressing linkages, rather than distinctions, between the three qualification tracks. The three most influential proposals of the Dearing report, which eventually led to the reforms in 2000, were the establishment of a 'lateral AS' as a half-way stage to a full A level, a closer alignment of advanced vocational qualifications with A levels in terms of grading and structure and the testing of key skills through stand-alone Key Skills Qualifications. In 1997, after its re-election, the Labour government launched further rounds of review and consultation using its own policy document, *Qualifying for Success* (DfEE, 1997). Many of the proposals in that policy, which included the three key recommendations of the Dearing report, were eventually implemented in a new system framework under *Curriculum 2000* (Hodgson and Spours, 2008). In a nutshell, *Curriculum 2000* used a reformulated concept of broadening access and greater integration of academic and vocational studies, chiefly through the adoption of a modular approach in learning and assessment and the introduction of AVCE (Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education) qualifications

[7] O levels were taken up by the top 20% of students; the CSE was introduced in 1960 to provide a more general education for the next 40% (Pring et al, 2009).

(Higham, 2003; Hodgson, Spours and Savory, 2003). To make the new system work, the government relied on a competitive education market, in which schools and colleges provided further expansion and offered broader programmes of study in order to attract students. The reform climate was, as described by Hodgson and Spours (2005, p.104), "one of high expectations but within a voluntarist context".

2.8.3 A levels as the dominant qualifications for 16-19 year olds

Despite government's efforts to broaden access to post-16 study, A levels have remained the main linchpin of the qualifications framework (Priestley, 2003). The AVCE qualifications were not popular with schools and colleges due to their 'academic' nature and demanding requirement in assessment (Hodgson and Spours, 2007). According to Hodgson and Spours (2003), the setting by government of a 50 per cent higher-education target in the *Qualifying for Success* policy signified that the government saw the future of the English post-compulsory education and training system as essentially education-based rather than work-based. In launching that policy in 1997, the government stated its commitment to the 'gold standard' of A levels. That commitment was repeated in 2004, when government rejected the recommendation of a unified framework for 14-19 learning in the Tomlinson (2004) report, even though it was welcomed by educational professionals as representing a holistic reform by creating a more unified and inclusive 14-19 education (Hodsgon and Spours, 2008). Instead, the Labour government opted for the development of new vocational 14-19 Diplomas in order to preserve the academic route provided by GCSEs and A levels. According to Hodgson and Spours (2007), the 14-19 Diplomas are likely to be limited in practice to providing a 'middle track' between the academic track and apprenticeship, and unlikely to become highly regarded or popular.

The development of vocational/applied qualifications, such as the 14-19 Diplomas, can be seen as efforts by the Labour government to reform vocational education to try to make it more compatible and attractive as an alternative to academic education. In general, however, vocational qualifications are still very much treated as second best to academic qualifications, and the general perception is that they test functional rather than high-level thinking skills (Senior, 2010). They are not highly regarded in employment, as judged by the relatively low wages for people holding vocational

qualifications compared to those with academic qualifications at every level, particularly at the lower levels. More recently, a review of vocational education was commissioned by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government and the Wolf Report was published in March 2011 (Wolf, 2011). That report points out that between a quarter and a third of 16-19 year olds are on vocational courses that do not lead to employment or higher education. It makes a number of recommendations, including changes to the funding and accountability systems, simplification of the vocational education system and better access to accurate and useful information for students.

Pring et al. (2009) point out that, due to a persistent 'tri-partite mentality'[8], young people continue to be categorized as 'academic', 'technical/vocational' and 'the rest', and past attempts to obtain parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications have failed. This is also acknowledged by Wolf (2011, p.9) in her report: "In recent years, both academic and vocational education in England have been bedevilled by well-meaning attempts to pretend that everything is worth the same as everything else. Students and families all know this is nonsense.". Following the Wolf report, there will no doubt be more ongoing debate and development regarding vocational education in England in the years to come.

2.9 Widening participation in post-16 and higher education

2.9.1 Widening participation in England over the past decades

Traditionally, English education worked in such a way that it expected only the most able to advance further into post-16 and higher education and was designed throughout its process to discriminate the able from the rest (Broadfoot, 1986; Howarth, 1991). Howarth (1991) likens this to a 'push-through' system which squeezes a small proportion through a narrow bottleneck while the rest, discouraged by the narrowness of the bottleneck, leave education. Before the Second World War, university education in the UK was confined to less than two per cent of 18-19 year olds (Dyhouse, 2007). As

[8] 'Tri-partitism' refers to the streaming of young people into grammar, technical and secondary modern schools according to their academic ability back in the 1940s, a notion which seems deeply ingrained in England.

a result of structural changes to secondary education in 1944 and an increasing affluence in the English middle class, demand for higher education rose during the 1950s (Sutherland, 2008). Access to higher education was widened further in the 1960s with the building of more universities, such as Sussex, Essex and Warwick, and the provision of a vocational route through polytechnics (Lambert and Lines, 2000). Many of the polytechnics were later turned into fully fledged universities in 1992 under the *Further and Higher Education Act* (Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007). More recently, many HE institutions (often former colleges of education) and FE colleges also offer courses at sub- and full-degree levels (Pring et al., 2009). In 2007, about 41 per cent of 18-19 year olds study at degree level in England (DfES, 2007).

2.9.2 The need for widening participation

The need for widening participation in post-16 and higher education in England can be interpreted three ways: economically, politically and socially. Economically, the focus is increasingly on comparisons of education and training systems internationally in order to raise England's competitiveness in the world's changing economy (Heaton and Lawson, 1996). Politically, the origin of the reform could be dated back to the speech of the then Prime Minister James Callaghan at Ruskin College in 1976, at a time of deepening recession and growing youth unemployment in England (Hodgson and Spours, 2003). In his speech, Callaghan questioned the suitability of the school curricula in meeting economical demands. That speech prompted the 'Great Debate' in England concerning the relationships between education, work and economy, which formed the basis of many educational policies that followed, including the development of new vocational qualifications in post-16 education. Finally, widening participation is needed socially to tackle youth unemployment and the social problems associated with it. The aim is to help young people develop generic and transferable skills in preparation for the changing labour market in order for them to be employable (Higham, Sharp and Yeomans, 1996).

The expansion in higher education has also been driven by the 16-19 year olds themselves, who have chosen in increasing numbers to stay on in full-time education (Higham, Sharp and Yeomans, 1996). According to Sutherland (2008), while higher education can be seen as a form of human capital investment by government to equip

individuals for more productive participation in the labour market, what became increasingly apparent during the 1990s were the private returns to be gained from a university degree. The demand for high-level skills in the UK economy has resulted in a substantial salary difference between graduates and non-graduates[9]. Many young people, therefore, see university education as a pathway to success in future career and life.

2.9.3 The current situation

A levels are used in general as a common basis of merit for selection to university in England. According to the Schwartz report (2004, p.36), *Fair Admissions to Higher Education*, "prior educational attainment remains the best single known indicator of retention and success at undergraduate level; this has been demonstrated clearly in relation to A-level results". The report also highlights the need for universities to select, in addition to examination results, on potential and diversity by considering other factors, including relevant skills and contextual factors. Nevertheless, A levels have remained the chief factor in admissions selections by most universities (Hodgson, Spours and Waring, 2005; Bassett et al., 2009).

Over the past decade, results in A levels have improved steadily (JCQ, 2001-2009). The Labour government's 50 per cent higher-education participation target turned out to be more a problem of supply of sufficient degree places than an issue of demand in search of qualified applicants. Increasingly, many eligible students have been turned away from university because of lack of places (BBC, 2009). According to UCAS (2010), this could be due to a number of factors: cuts by government of funded university places, an increase in number of applicants from outside the UK, a large number of mature students returning to education from a poor job market, and an increase in number of 18-19 year olds seeking to go to university. The situation may change after the coalition government, which was elected in 2010, raised the cap of tuition fees (Economist, 2010); some young people may be discouraged from going to university due to the high fees or costly student loans.

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[9] The average difference in salary is 12-15% for males and 20-25% for females (Sutherland, 2008).

2.10 The modular approach and resit policy of A levels

2.10.1 The modular approach of A levels

Since their introduction in 1994, modular A-level syllabuses have been increasingly popular with schools and modularisation was fully implemented in A levels under reforms in *Curriculum 2000* (Hodgson and Spours, 2003). The new A-level qualification consists of two tiers: an advanced-subsidiary (AS) module and an A2 module, each worth 50 per cent (Directgov, n.d.a). Initially, there were three assessment units in each module[10] but these were reduced to two in 2010. Compared to two or three A-level subjects prior to the reform, students now take between four to five subjects in the first year of sixth-form (Year 12), each of which leads to a stand-alone AS qualification. They then proceed to full A levels for some, typically between two to three, of their subjects by completing the A2 module in the second year (Year 13). The objective of the reform is to encourage students to take up a broader range of subjects and to boost attainment rates by providing a more gradual gradient between GCSE and A levels (Hodgson, Spours and Savory, 2003). According to Hodgson, Spours and Waring (2005), however, there is no hard evidence of students gaining advantage when applying for university by taking a wider number of subjects; offers are still made largely on the basis of three A levels.

2.10.2 Supporters and critics of the modular approach

The modular approach of A levels has attracted much controversy in terms of its effect on student learning. It has both supporters and critics (Hodgson and Spours, 1997; Hayward and McNicholl, 2007). On the positive side, it is seen by many educationalists as an important tool for improving learning. Their argument is that the structure of smaller units, where learning outcomes and assessment criteria are more explicit, helps students learn and raise their achievement. In other words, the modular approach enhances extrinsic motivation, provides short-term assessment goals and gives formative feedback to students and teachers.

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[10] The Year 13 students in this study were amongst the last cohort of students taking three units each in the AS and A2 modules.

On the other hand, modularisation has been criticised for over-assessment and inducing a fragmented approach to learning. Learning is atomized as students learn in bite sizes, with the result that they often fail to grasp the understanding or the meaning of the subject as a whole (Young and Leney, 1997; Sadler, 2007). To address some of these concerns, the QCDA (2009) introduced in 2010 some new guidelines which emphasize more varied approaches to question types, more coherence between questions, more extended writing, more open-ended questions and improvement in synoptic assessment.

2.10.3 The resit policy of A levels

The most criticized feature of the modular approach of A levels, as evidenced from the media reports (examples given in the next section), is clearly the resit policy. Under the modular approach, resit opportunities, which were not possible previously in linear, one-off examinations, are available for students because they can resit past units in their AS/A2 modules during the two-year sixth-form course (Directgov, n.d.a). In October 2003, the QCA (2003) removed the limit on the number of AS/A2 resits. In 2007, it released a research report on the review of A-level resits (QCA, 2007a). The report suggests that about one-third of candidates resat a subject more than once and there was no evidence of large number of multiple resits. The report ends with two proposals under the headings of 'implications' (QCA, 2007a, para.19-22): "reducing the number of resitting opportunities for each unit to one" and "weighting A2 units to increase their role in determining the A level grade", both of which were supported by teachers in the research but neither of which was taken up by the QCA, which decided to continue with the unlimited resit rule.

According to Hodgson and Spours (2003), one of the issues with the modular resit arrangements is the culture in schools of resitting to maximize grade attainment in A levels. The resit feature of A levels is challenged by Despontin (2006), the former president of the Girls' Schools Association, who argues that, by deluding young students into the false security of deferred achievement, educational institutions are not doing a good job in preparing students for adult life, which she suggests, is regularly punctuated by once-only moments where a failure may not lead to a second chance.

2.11 A levels' performance over the past decade

2.11.1 Improvement in A-level results in the past decade

Since the introduction of the modular approach and resit arrangements in *Curriculum 2000*, results in A levels have risen steadily in England every year.

Table 2.1: Results by grades in A levels, England, 2001-2009

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
A	18.3	20.3	21.3	22.1	22.4	23.8	25.0	25.6	26.5
A-C	58.8	64.5	66.8	68.3	69.3	70.8	72.2	73.4	74.6
A-E	89.6	94.1	95.3	95.9	96.2	96.5	96.9	97.2	97.5

Source: JCQ (2001-2009)

2.11.2 Responses of government and education sector to the improvement

The government and education sector have attributed the steady increase in A-level results to better teaching and learning. Below are a few of their comments.

> These results are built on the hard work of students, schools and colleges. I congratulate the students and thank our teachers for their commitment. My message to them is simple. Don't let anyone tell you that standards have dropped because more of you have done well, this is simply a myth.
>
> David Miliband, then School Standards Minister (epolitix, 2004)

> This is the generation who've had to cope not only with the constant examination onslaught, but also with the injustice of having their results rubbished by ill-informed doom-merchants. *Curriculum 2000* has its faults, but this year's results do show the advantages of candidates receiving feedback during their courses rather than just at the end.
>
> Association of Teachers and Lecturers (epolitix, 2004)

> The improvement of results at A-level reflects how well students have done this year. Candidates who have worked hard are getting the results they deserve.
>
> Jim Sinclair, Director of Joint Council for Qualifications (e4s, 2007)

> Every year there is a chorus of criticism from those who simply can't believe that it is young people's efforts and the quality of teaching that have yielded the results. Those critics cling tenaciously to the unsubstantiated allegation that somehow exam standards are falling. Parents, young people and the general public should ignore those critics and celebrate young people's success.
>
> National Union of Teachers (epolitix, 2009)

2.11.3 Public response to the improvement

The public, on the other hand, remain sceptical about the validity of the rising standards. Every August, almost every newspaper, regardless of its political inclination, carries a news story about concerns of easier A levels or 'grade inflation'. Their reports are usually backed up by quotes from educational professionals and public surveys, as shown in the following examples.

> The study by the Society of Headmasters and Headmistresses of Independent Schools, representing 100 fee-paying schools, concluded that a "strong retake culture" is leading to "inflated" achievement at AS-level - the first half of an A-level.
>
> Daily Mail (2007)

> A major review of the A-level grading system is necessary to maintain public confidence in the exam, the head of Edexcel said yesterday. Mr Jarvis added that "the perception of quality" was "at least as important" as the actual quality. "If A-level is the gold standard, how can it remain the gold standard if more and more students get one?" he said.
>
> The Independent (2009a)

> It is not only a sceptical media that is raising doubts about the value of these qualifications - it is the people who teach them. A survey of sixth-form teachers by Civitas this week found a widespread disenchantment with the examinations, on the grounds they do not stretch the brightest and are almost impossible to fail.
>
> Telegraph (2009a)

> The rise in the pass rate over the last three decades has prompted concerns that A-levels have got easier while candidates' abilities have remained the same. Research at Durham University has found that a candidate who would have got a C two decades ago would get an A now.
>
> Guardian (2010)

2.11.4 Introduction of A* awards

With more than a quarter of students getting grade As in A levels nowadays, universities, particularly the elite ones, find it hard to discriminate among the top students (Telegraph, 2009a). In response to this, the QCDA (2009) introduced, with effect from the 2010 examinations, the award of A* grades to students who have achieved both a grade A overall at A level and an A* on the aggregated A2 units. The aim is to provide better discrimination at grade A and to help universities in admissions selections. The entry requirements for many university courses, however, are at levels

below grade A. As A-level results continue to rise at all levels, discrimination between student applicants remains difficult for universities.

2.12 General attitudes towards the resit system

2.12.1 General attitudes of schools and colleges

Although there are no penalties in A-level resits, there are many factors behind a student's resit decision, such as time, cost and extra workload, and school culture can also be influential. Below are a few examples of the practice of some schools and colleges in England, based on their websites (all accessed in February 2010).

The Netherhall School & Sixth-Form College (a comprehensive school)
(www.netherhall.org/2008/08/re-sits-and-payments/)

> Any student wishing to resit an examination can do so at his/her expense, filling the appropriate orange form and submitting the entry before the final deadline for amendments. After the final deadline, the cost to resit an exam will double.

Alton College (a sixth-form college)
(*www.altoncollege.ac.uk/parents/booklets/parents_guide.pdf*)

> The objective of the college's resit policy is to ensure that students can achieve the highest grades of which they are capable balanced across their entire programme of study. The policy also recognizes that there are risks attached with resitting too many exams, that this can be disruptive to lessons, their learning in other subjects and that students can put themselves under counterproductive pressure and stress.

Arthur Mellows Village Collage (a comprehensive school)
(www.arthurmellows.peterborough.sch.uk/.../results%20booklet%202009.doc)

> A2 level candidates are advised to re-take very low-scoring units only but they should consider the effects of studying to repeat an AS unit while preparing for A2 units. Experience suggests that improvements in repeated units are at the expense of yet-to-be taken ones. Any costs for resits will be charged to the candidate.

Oundle School (an independent school)
(*www.oundleschool.org.uk/academic/Exams/re_amrk,php#resit)*

> It is possible to retake units without limit at any time. We do not certificate AS at Oundle until the U6th which makes the operation of resits very simple.

The above examples suggest that schools and colleges in England are not, in general, against their students resitting in A levels but their attitudes and approaches to resits can vary significantly. While some simply stipulate that it is the responsibility of the students to submit on time the resit application forms and pay the appropriate fees, others highlight the pros and cons of resits. It should, however, be noted that the information is based on what is posted on the websites and may not reflect the full practice of the schools or colleges concerned, such as the advice given to individual students by their teachers.

2.12.2 General attitudes of universities

When students do poorly in A levels at the end of sixth-form and want to retake them, they will need to repeat A levels in another year, and many do. Under the previous linear A levels, this was the *only* way for students to improve their A-level results. Many universities and degree programmes, however, adopt a fairly negative attitude towards A-level repeaters, by either declining their applications, imposing higher requirements, or only considering them under exceptional circumstances (AdmissionsForum, 2010); examples are the Dental School of Newcastle University and the Department of Psychology of the University of York (according to their websites accessed in April 2010).

Although both entail obtaining the final result in more than one sitting of an examination, the treatment of repeaters and resitters cannot be more different. While repeaters are generally not received favourably, resitters are accepted by most universities with little or no discrimination. The following example highlights the different treatments:

St John's College, University of Cambridge
(*http: www.joh.cam.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/faqs/#17*, accessed, January 2011)

> We do not accept retakes. Examination grades should be gained at one sitting. However, we are happy for applicants to resit individual modules, as long as this is done before their final result is published.

It seems that, as long as the grades are attained by a student within the two-year sixth-form course, it does not matter how many attempts the student has taken to achieve

them. The situation may be changing, however. It has been reported that some universities now adopt a policy of ignoring resit results (Sunday Times, 2010); an example being the Medical School of University College, London.

2.13 Effect of high-stakes public examinations on student learning

Both the design and the assessment emphasis of high-stakes public examinations can have a far-reaching impact on teaching and learning (Madaus, Russell and Higgins, 2009). There is plenty of evidence to show that high-stakes examinations shape instruction in schools. Butterfield (1995) writes about the negative backwash effect on education when UK examinations in the 1970s put too much emphasis on content with the consequence that teaching emphasized recall and speed of writing rather than what was actually to be learned. Airasian (1994), writing with reference to testing programmes in the United States in the 1980s, observes that high-stakes tests drive instructions and thereby reverse the traditional relationship between classroom objectives, instruction and evaluation. Havnes and McDowell (2004) point out that public examinations have changed from being a way of assessing student learning to a way of communicating to the students what counts as valid knowledge; the most common views these days are 'students learn what is assessed' and 'you get what you assess'.

The effect of high-stakes examinations on student learning is often associated with how students are motivated to learn in the classroom. It has been suggested that the extrinsic reward of high-stakes examinations (as in 'the certificate') is promoted much more strongly than the intrinsic reward (as in the learning) supposedly signified by that reward (Gipps and Stobart, 1990).

2.14 Theories of student motivation and approaches to learning

2.14.1 The concept of motivation

Motivation is a complicated concept; simply put, motivation can be described as what makes people do what they do (Deci, 1975; Entwistle, 1981). In psychology, this relates to a fundamental question: whether human behaviour is free or determined, and there are mainly two approaches to it (Deci, 1975; Stipek, 1998). Mechanistic or

reinforcement theories assume that humans are basically passive and their behaviour is determined by a complex interaction between their unconscious drives (the response) and the environment (the stimulus). A person's response is strengthened through reinforcement. Organismic or cognitive theories, on the other hand, assert that people act on their environment. They place primary importance on cognitive and affective processes as determinants of behaviour, on the belief that people do play an active part in the choice of what to do by forming a motive for a desired future state (goal-directed behaviour). Over the years, there has been strong support for cognitive theories (cf. Maslow's (1954) concept of self-actualization; Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory), and the concept of motivation has become more complex; a dominant view nowadays depicts humans as goal-directed actors who must coordinate several goals and desires across multiple contexts in short-term as well as longer-term time frames (Eccles et al., 1998).

According to Deci et al. (1991), most motivation theories in student learning use the concept of intention, which is concerned with factors that promote (or fail to promote) students' understanding or assessment of the different behavioural alternatives that will lead them to certain outcomes as well as the students' engagement in efficacious behaviour to attain those outcomes. Related to this is the concept of goal orientation.

2.14.2 Goal orientation and theories of ability

Dweck and Leggett (1988) suggest a social-cognitive model of achievement motivation, in which motivational constructs, including goals and values, are assumed to guide students' approaches to a task, which influence their cognition and affect.

Figure 2.1: Model of intelligence theories, goal orientation and behaviour patterns

Theory of intelligence	Goal orientation	Perceived present ability	Behaviour pattern
Entity (Intelligence is fixed)	Performance goal (goal is to gain positive judgements/ avoid negative judgements of competence)	High	Mastery oriented (seek challenge; high persistence)
		Low	Helpless (avoid challenge; low persistence)
Incremental (Intelligence is malleable)	Learning goal (goal is to increase competence)	High or Low	Mastery oriented (seek challenge that fosters learning; high persistence)

Source: Dweck and Leggett (1988, p.259)

Their model specifies two implicit theories of ability and two achievement goals. The 'theory of intelligence' refers to the implicit conception about the nature of ability; the entity theory sees ability as stable and immutable and the incremental theory characterizes ability as amenable to change. A student's perceived ability is the confidence of his or her ability and the likelihood of completing the task at hand. Achievement goals represent the purpose of task engagement; the specific type of goals adopted is posited to create a framework in the study of how students interpret, experience and act in their achievement pursuits. There are two achievement goals in the model. Performance goals focus on demonstrating competence and involve judging and validating the adequacy of one's ability. Learning goals focus on developing competence and mastery and involve increasing existing abilities and developing new skills.

Dweck and Leggett suggest that performance goals, with their focus on judging ability, create vulnerability to a 'helpless' motivational reaction in that failure implies low ability and the occurrence of failure often leads to debilitation. This applies even to students with high confidence because, although they may generally be more challenge-seeking, when faced with the threat of a failure outcome, they may nonetheless avoid challenge. In contrast, learning goals, with their focus on developing ability, promote the maintenance of a 'mastery-oriented' response. Obstacles and challenges are viewed as a natural part of the learning process. Failure simply means that the current strategy may be insufficient to the task and thus require upgrading or revision. This can create an opportunity for a more satisfying mastery experience; the continued belief that success can occur through effort will also engender determination.

In later research, Heyman and Dweck (1992) caution that the 'benefits' of learning goals or the 'dangers' of performance goals must, however, be interpreted with care. Students who simply pursue learning goals but do not meet the performance requirements of a task could potentially be maladaptive by acting against their best interests. Often, students nowadays need to hold multiple goals and their ability to coordinate different goals in a given situation and over time plays an important role in achieving success in education (Elliot et al., 2006).

2.14.3 Intrinsic and extrinsic rewards

Another way to interpret goal pursuits in learning is the distinction between intrinsic goals and extrinsic goals (Deci et al., 2004). Deci (1975) suggests that people engage in goal-directed behaviour and expect some reward afterwards. A reward is not the same thing as a goal; a goal may lead to rewards. A reward can be an extrinsic reward, such as money or praise, where satisfaction follows the reward. It can also be intrinsic, such as the feeling of competence and self-determination, where satisfaction usually comes with the reward. According to Deci et al. (2004), pursuits of intrinsic rewards have a positive effect on learning because they promote satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence while vigorous pursuit of extrinsic rewards tends to aim at the external indicators of worth and social comparisons and may lead to unstable self-esteem. Their research suggests that, by emphasizing intrinsic goals in framing learning activities and providing an autonomy-supportive learning climate, teachers can help students to become more dedicated and engaged in learning activities.

Related to intrinsic and extrinsic rewards are the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. According to Entwistle (1998), intrinsically-motivated behaviours are internal to the person, who engages in the task or activity out of interest and to feel competent; the goal is to improve one's ability through mastery attempts. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation is instrumental in form and is strongly influenced by external rewards and pressure; the focus is on satisfactory completion of a task or course. This internal-external dichotomy, however, is not always clear-cut. It has been argued that intrinsic motivation is proportional to the degree to which individuals perceive their behaviour as being self-determined rather than being controlled by others or rewards (Stipek, 1998). In terms of goal orientation, Heyman and Dweck (1992) suggest that learning goals generally enhance intrinsic motivation while performance goals tend to undermine it.

2.14.4 Intrinsic and extrinsic factors

Deci and Ryan (1985) suggest that intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation are the two extremes of a continuum of motivational orientation and somewhere in the middle, there are 'identified' and 'introjected' behaviours, depending on the extent by which the reason for acting is influenced by external sources. They contend that people's behaviour and its outcome can be accounted for by personal (intrinsic) as well as environmental (extrinsic) forces. Personal forces include trying (motivation) and power (ability). Environmental forces include barriers to the occurrence of behavioural outcomes, such as task difficulties and luck. These factors were expanded later by Harlen and Crick (2003) in their review of student motivation. They include in the personal or intrinsic factors, the students' sense of self (values, attitudes and learning disposition), engagement with learning (sense of control, goal orientation and self-efficacy) and willingness to exert effort to achieve the learning goal (ability as malleable). Environmental or extrinsic factors refer to school ethos, curriculum, peer culture, home support and assessment practices. Harlen and Crick stress that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors need to be considered in the study of students' motivation for learning.

According to Winfield and Bolingbroke (1998), different combinations of intrinsic and extrinsic factors can lead to different states of students' commitment to learning, including high commitment (high intrinsic factors and high extrinsic factors), low commitment (low intrinsic factors and high extrinsic factors), withdrawal (low intrinsic factors and low extrinsic factors) and rebellion (high intrinsic factors and low extrinsic factors). They argue that educationalists need to accept that passing examinations is an understandable goal for students and to recognize that motivation is a personal construct; i.e. what is intrinsic for some can be extrinsic for others.

2.14.5 The expectancy-value model

Pintrich (1989) suggests that when considering student motivation in learning, additional constructs, such as self-efficacy and task value, should also be considered. He adopts a modified version of Eccles's (1983) expectancy-value model in his study of students' learning motivation. The three elements in the motivational components are: value, expectancy and affective. Value is the students' reason for engaging in a task

and their belief about the importance, utility or interest of the task. It includes the students' goal orientation and task value. Expectancy concerns the students' belief about their ability to perform a task, their judgement of self-efficacy and control (both internal and external), and their expectancy for success at the task. Affective refers to the students' evaluation of themselves in terms of self-worth or self-esteem and their emotional reactions to the task (e.g. examination anxiety).

Pintrich points out that apart from the motivational components, there are also the cognitive components in student learning, which deal with students' knowledge about a task or themselves and also their learning strategies. Learning strategies include cognitive (learning or encoding of material as well as strategies to facilitate retrieval of information), metacognitive (strategies relating to planning, regulating, monitoring and modifying cognitive processes) and resource management (strategies to control resources that influence the quality and quantity of the students' involvement in the task). His research highlights the dynamic interplay between motivation and cognition, which complement one another in the study of student learning.

2.14.6 Approaches to learning

Past research has shown evidence of a strong relationship between motivation (motive) and study methods (strategy) in students' performance (Entwistle and McCune, 2004). According to Biggs (1988), students adopt different approaches to learning based on their perception of the task, their learning motivation and the context in which the task is presented. Biggs identifies three different approaches to learning: surface approach, deep approach and achieving approach. Associated with extrinsic motivation is a surface motive and this results in a surface approach to learning. The main purpose is to meet requirements (not to fail) without spending too much effort (no hard work). The resulting strategy is essentially reproductive, concentrating on the surface features or 'signs' of learning rather the meanings or implications of what is learned. In contrast, deep motive is based on intrinsic motivation. The strategy is to satisfy one's curiosity in learning; the students relate what is being learned to prior knowledge, theorize about it and derive extensions and exceptions. Unlike surface or deep approaches, achieving approach refers to arranging the

context for carrying out the task, such as by keeping notes and good time management. The motivation comes from competition or ego-enhancement and the strategy is to organize one's working time and space.

In terms of affective implications, a deep approach leads to task involvement and satisfying outcomes whereas a surface approach is frequently alienating, with students experiencing anxiety about the outcome and resentful of the time taken over the task. Both surface and deep approaches are often referred to in the study of the cognitive processes used by students when engaging a task, such as rote learning vs. meaningful learning. Biggs points out that while the learning approaches tend to be characteristic of students over time, situational pressures (e.g. pressure from examinations) usually encourage surface learning but appropriate intervention in teaching can induce a deep approach to learning.

2.15 Summary of findings from the literature review

In summary, the literature review has highlighted the following areas which provide a useful backdrop for the research:

- Public examinations serve very important roles in society, in terms of selection in assessing students' potential and certification in judging students' performance. They are also used by government as an evaluation tool to control teaching and learning standards and the performance of the education system. All these roles are purported to be served by A levels.
- The UK government has in past decades tried to widen participation in higher education in order to provide a more competitive workforce to meet the changing and challenging needs of a skill-based economy. More students nowadays want to go into higher education because of the potential of better career prospects and higher earnings. A levels have remained the chief selection tool for university admissions.

- Some structural changes were introduced to A levels under the *Curriculum 2000* reform. An A level is now made up of AS and A2 units and uses a modular approach to assessment, as opposed to the previous linear, terminal examination system. Students are allowed to resit past AS/A2 units during the two-year sixth-form course with no limit or penalty.
- The advantages of a modular approach are the short-term goals, explicitness in assessment criteria and formative feedback, but the disadvantages are over-assessment and fragmented approach to learning. The resit system has been criticized for encouraging an assessment culture and a second-chance mentality among sixth-form students.
- A levels have a long history and are valued as the 'gold standard' of the English education system. Since the *Curriculum 2000* reform, A-level results have risen steadily every year. The general perception is that the examinations are getting easier under the modular system and resit opportunities are the reason behind the large increase in A-level results.
- Resits are optional. In general, schools and colleges in England do not seem to be opposed to resits but their practice may vary in terms of support and advice to their students. Universities seem to accept resits generally in admissions selections, but the rising A-level results may pose a problem due to the reduced discriminatory power between student applicants.
- Past research has shown that high-stakes examinations can influence teaching and learning in the classroom. Students' goal-orientation, confidence of their ability and their perception of the difficulty of the task at hand all affect their behaviour, motivation, affective and cognition, and these tend to have an effect on their approaches to learning.

2.16 Reflection on the literature review

A levels are high-stakes examinations in England. There is no shortage of literature or media reports about them. I have been able to search fairly widely on the attitudes of government, schools and universities about the modular resit system, but what is lacking are the views of the key stakeholder, the students. There are student websites,

such as the Student Room, but the information is often piecemeal, more a chat than an in-depth discussion on issues, as would be expected. In order to find out more about how students view resits and how they make use of resits, it is desirable, if not essential, to learn from the students directly rather than to deduce that information from chats on the internet or third-party reports in the newspapers on results-publication days. There is very little known research done on resits based on students' experience. The closest to this approach is Hodgson and Spours's (2003, 2005) research on the learner experience of *Curriculum 2000*, but their study covers many aspects of the reform and resits are not its primary focus. In view of this gap in the knowledge about students' experience in A-level resits, a research study based on the students' accounts seems to be useful and worthwhile.

Apart from highlighting the usefulness of a student-based approach to the research, the literature review has also provided some other guiding principles which helped the research. They are:

1. When investigating the effectiveness of A-level resits, it is desirable to consider student learning during sixth-form as a whole rather than their performance in the examination alone;
2. In order to understand the external influences on the students' resit actions, it is helpful to know the attitudes of schools and colleges, teachers and universities;
3. In order to examine what is important to sixth-form students in terms of learning objectives, it is useful to understand the roles of A levels and how resit features in those roles;
4. In order to understand the implications of resits for student learning, it is important to examine how the students' goal-orientation, perception of themselves as learners and engagement with learning affect their motivation to learn and approaches to learning.

The research methodology and the research questions have been formulated on the basis of these guiding principles; they are discussed in the next chapter.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Broadfoot (1996) describes examinations and assessment as a 'central feature of social life'. The research into the phenomenon of A-level resits is essentially social research. The emphasis of methodology of social research, according to most literature, is on the linkage between the methodological strategy, research design and research methods (cf. Bulmer, 1977; Crotty, 1998; Patten, 2002; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). This chapter discusses the methodology of the research study under these three key areas.

3.2 Methodology, research design and research methods

According to Bulmer (1977), research methodology refers to the systematic and logical study of the general principles guiding sociological investigations; it involves strategy, which is the way in which a particular empirical study is designed and carried out, as well as methods, which generally cover the research techniques. Crotty (1998) suggests that methodology is the strategy and plan of action which links the choice and use of particular methods to the desired outcome. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) define methodology as the framework that relates to the entire process of research, research design as the plan of action that links the philosophical assumptions to specific methods, and methods as the techniques of data collection and analysis. Similar definitions are given by Patten (2002), who stresses the importance of an overall methodological framework within which specific study design and research-method decisions are made. Before discussing the research strategy and methodology, I want to examine some key issues about social research.

3.3 The social world vs. the natural world

In researching the social world, two major questions have dominated the debate in the past century: 'where or what is social reality' and 'how do we get to know it' (Blaikie, 1993; Outhwaite, 1998; Bryman, 2004; Delanty, 2005). These questions relate respectively to two central concepts in the philosophy of social science: ontology and epistemology. The questions are usually answered, or attempted to be answered, by

comparing the social world to the natural world in terms of whether the subject matter in social science are the same as that in natural sciences and whether the methods used in the natural sciences can or should be applied to social science. Traditionally, there are two major philosophical schools of thought in this regard. The positivistic view generally believes that there is no difference while the opposite view, which comes in a variety of forms, including interpretivism and constructionism, suggests that there is.

Using the social process of examinations as my reference, I will review briefly some of the literature about the different philosophical approaches, including positivism, interpretivism, critical social research, social constructionism and critical realism. This is followed by my own philosophical assumptions of the phenomenon of A-level resits, based on which the research strategy was defined and the research questions structured.

3.4 Different philosophical approaches to knowing the social world

3.4.1 The social reality of examinations

Consider the following conversation of a father to his son:
"The reality is you have failed the examination. So, what are you going to do about it?"

'Reality' in this case can be taken as referring to a 'fact', and the fact here is likely that the child has sat an examination but did not get the result required, such as meeting the target level expected of him in school or achieving an examination grade necessary for university admission. Reality, in a more general sense, however, goes beyond this single fact. From the tone of the father's question, 'failing the examination' implies a problem, or at least an unsatisfactory situation which requires follow-up or remedial action.

Although examinations are not created by the individuals, they affect them in many significant ways, such as how one is seen in society (as a failure or success), one's attitude (motivated or de-motivated), one's relationship with others (how one is regarded by family, teachers and peers) and one's choices (what to do next). As discussed in the literature review, examinations have become one of the major instruments for locating each individual's place in society (Broadfoot, 1996).

According to Madaus, Russell and Higgins (2009), high-stakes testing works to the effect that it can lessen the control individuals have over decisions that affect their lives.

3.4.2 Positivism and post-positivism

The French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) pointed out that, in every society, "there is a group of phenomena which may be differentiated from those studied by the other natural sciences" (Durkheim, 1895, p.26). These phenomena are recognized by the power of external coercion which exercises over the individuals, in what Durkheim called 'social currents' or social constraints. Social reality is seen as externally constrained realities or 'social facts', which are to be studied objectively from the outside (Delanty and Strydom, 2003). Durkheim argued that society supplies ultimate values to social actors and provides them with a set of normative rules for concrete behaviour in the form of moral forces (Cohen, 1996). For instance, the father who values the well-being of his child (a sacred value) will try to realize this value by acting in accordance with societal norms (morally), such as adopting a belief that succeeding in examinations and gaining a higher education are always in the best interests of the child. For Durkheim, social reality is *sui generis*, independent of the individuals that constitute that society.

Durkheim's approach is typical of a positivistic view of social science. Since the 1980s, however, positivism has been subject to much debate within sociology. Post-positivists or neo-positivists, notably, the Austro-British philosopher Karl Popper (1902-1994), no longer contend the traditional positivistic view that social reality can be reduced to observable units or natural phenomena; rather, the social world is intrinsically different by nature from the natural world (Delanty, 2005). They accept that people are all part of the social world and therefore cannot observe it as totally objective and disinterested outsiders. Nevertheless, the central idea of positivism or post-positivism remains as one based on the rationalistic and empiricist philosophy that the social world can be studied using the same method or logic of explanation as the natural world and that there is an objective reality, knowable within certain probability limits (Blaikie, 1993; Outhwaite, 1998; Delanty, 2005). The role of research is to test theories and to provide materials for the development of laws. The general assumption is that the researcher and the researched are independent of each other.

3.4.3 Interpretivism

The difference between fact and value emerged in philosophy during the Enlightenment period in the eighteenth century. The fact-value distinction is a concept used by the Scottish philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776), to distinguish between positive and normative statements, i.e. between 'what is', that which can be discovered by science, philosophy or reason, and 'what ought to be', a judgement where rationality is limited to describing a collective opinion and can be agreed upon by consensus (Delanty, 2005). Hume argued that it is not possible to derive 'ought' from 'is': values cannot be inferred from facts because human values are only conventions and not objectively grounded facts.

Max Weber (1864-1920), the German sociologist, tried to bridge the gap between fact and value by linking explanation and understanding in the study of the meaning of human behaviour in what is generally known as interpretivism (Delanty, 2005). While Durkheim emphasized the external controls on social action, Weber focused on the identification of the motivation or the causes behind human action. For Weber, social reality is not an objective reality but a meaningfully constructed reality which requires interpretation. Interpretivists argue that the focus of social science is very different from that of the natural sciences because social science involves human factors. An interpretivistic approach suggests that the structure of social reality represents a changeable historical-cultural configuration and is too complex to be understood by observation alone; it requires interpretation and is identifiable only in relation to human values. As the Austrian social scientist, Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) put it, social reality "has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings living, acting, and thinking within it" (Schutz, 1962, p.59).

Positivists see a clear distinction between factual statements and evaluations; they insist that science should be value-free (Delanty, 2005). Interpretivists, on the other hand, are of the view that there are aspects of social science which cannot be value-free. For instance, Weber believed that social scientists could not draw on objective values to define what is worth investigating and, similarly, the dissemination of research cannot be free of values, whether they are those of researchers, policymakers or practitioners (Weber, 1904; Scott, 2000). Weber called these value-relevance activities. However,

while conceding that certain values exist in research orientation and dissemination, Weber nevertheless maintained that social research should aim to be value-neutral in activities such as data collection and data analysis.

3.4.4 Critical social research

Increasingly, however, it has been suggested that values and judgement are unavoidable in the act of social research itself, not just in research orientation and dissemination, but also in deciding what data to collect and how to interpret them (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Harding, 1986, 1991). These values are classified by Fay (1975) as values within the framework of scientific activity. Fay, however, stresses instead the role values have as "part of the conceptual framework which defines what it is to have real, i.e. scientific, knowledge about some phenomenon" (ibid., p.15). The values in this case refer to those typically found in policy science. For Fay, social research is not about value-free science but critical science, which not only accepts the necessity of interpretive categories in social science and the recognition that many of the actions people perform are caused by social conditions over which they have no control, but also understands and recognizes that social theory is interconnected with social practice.

Fay (1975, p.51) points out that it is hard to conceive of the notion of a value-neutral policy because it is difficult to distinguish between an end and a means since "for every means is an end relative to the means required to achieve it". According to Bhaskar (1998a, p.409, original emphasis), social science is "non-neutral in a double respect: it always consists in a *practical intervention* in social life and it sometimes *logically entails* value and practical judgements". Marxism, critical theory and feminism, as various forms of critical social research, can all be said to have challenged the value-free concept (Outhwaite, 1998). They consider social research as a resource for social criticism, with power, justice and social processes as their main concerns and make explicit their role and 'value-commitment' in their work. In critical social research, researchers often interrogate commonly-held values and assumptions, challenge conventional social structures and engage in social action (Crotty, 1998). For them, social research is not about simply collecting data or accumulating knowledge for its own sake, but for bringing about progressive social forces (Patton, 2002; Delanty, 2005). According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, p.28), due to their respective

preoccupation with technical and hermeneutic knowledge, the positivistic and interpretivistic paradigms are regarded as "representing incomplete accounts of social behaviour by their neglect of the political and ideological contexts of much educational research", and the paradigm of critical research has become an emerging force in educational research.

3.4.5 Social constructionism and critical realism

Other schools of philosophy in the post-empiricist era generally fall into two broad groups: social constructionism and critical realism[11] (Delanty, 2005).

Social constructionism can be seen as a response to critiques of positivism as a driving force behind human sciences, the failure of interpretivism in recognizing that power shapes meaning and interpretation, and the loss of faith in Marxist social science following the global impact of the revolutions in Eastern Europe (Houston, 2001; Burr, 2003). The focus of social constructionism is on the relation of social actors and social reality; that is, the subject is an active agent as opposed to the passive conception of subjectivity in the value-free social science of positivism (Schwandt, 1998; Delanty, 2005). Social constructionists argue that each human being perceives the world differently and social reality can only be known through our individual cognitive structures. Reality to social constructionists is often not a single thing (an act or behaviour) but refers simultaneously to several different items, such as the experience, the discourse and the behaviour itself, and how they interact with each other.

Critical realists, on the other hand, emphasize that realities underlying knowledge do exist. They believe that there is an external reality which is independent of human consciousness, not easily observable but which can nevertheless be known (Delanty, 2005). Critical realism rejects positivism in favour of an emancipatory theory of science that is both explanatory and interpretive. On the other hand, it seeks to rescue the sciences from relativism, of which social constructionism is often criticized (Burr, 1998, 2003). For critical realists, there is a basic distinction between human knowledge of the world and the reality of it. Social structures are 'real' in the sense that they are

[11] There are several forms of constructionism or constructivism and realism (see, for example, Delanty, 2005); these two can be said to be more widely adopted and less extreme.

partially independent of individuals and their perceptions (Silverman, 1985). According to Bhaskar (1998b), there are two sides of 'knowledge': transitive objects of knowledge of things produced by humans and intransitive objects of knowledge of things which are not produced by humans at all. A distinction is thus needed between ontology (being) and epistemology (knowledge). As Scott (2000, p.14) suggests: ontology with regard to social science is relatively enduring but epistemology is "always transitive, and therefore subject to the prevailing power arrangements in society". Dunne, Pryor and Yates (2005, p.20) summarize it as follows: "in this position, we can take for granted the nature of the social as real, stable and partially independent while the construction of our knowledge of this reality is tempered by our position in time and space and by the cultural milieu that we inhabit".

Despite their differences, social constructionism and critical realism share many similarities. For instance, they both recognize the historical and cultural constitution of knowledge and both support, in different ways, an emancipatory critique in social science (Delanty, 2005). Hacking (1999, 2002) points out that talk of social construction is not merely descriptive but relates to a label with a message in a certain cultural history, often politically linked; what social constructionism tries to do is to unmask certain social phenomena through discourse by drawing attention to a generated concept, such as teenage pregnancy or child abuse, and its associated issues or problems. Unlike social constructionism, critical realism aims at getting at the truth by constructing hypotheses about the mechanisms underpinning the particular social phenomenon and seeking out their effects (Bryman, 2004). According to Bhaskar's theory of explanatory critiques (Bhaskar, 1998a; Parker, 1998), explanation does not function simply as another description but simultaneously as a critique. Explanations can be used to criticize an institution, not in addition to, but by virtue of explaining it. For instance, it has been suggested that Karl Marx exposed the truth of capitalism's exploitation of people and its indifference to human needs, not by denouncing that capitalism generates false beliefs, but by using explanatory critiques which exposed that how capitalism works is contradictory to its delusive appearance (Collier, 1998).

3.5 Research strategy

According to Dunne, Pryor and Yates (2005, p.14), conducting research is not just about the technical details: "the whole research process is dependent upon the initial opting for a particular version of the nature of the social". Different philosophical positions can lead to different strategies in social inquiry. For instance, in studying the phenomenon of A-level resits, I could adopt a positivistic (or post-positivistic) approach by designing a quantitative study using two groups of students with similar composition or controlled variables (gender, family background, prior academic attainment, etc.), one with resits and the other with no resits, and comparing the two groups' similarities and differences in terms of A-level results, learning strategies, social engagement and resit decision-making, through the use of questionnaires and statistical analyses. Alternatively, I could use a social-constructionistic approach by constructing a concept of 'resit mentality' in A levels. Through interviewing a wide spectrum of people, I could try to identify a variety of issues or problems associated with 'resit mentality', such as how it shapes young people's approach to taking second chances or how achievement over several attempts is defined or accepted by people in general. Either of these two approaches could provide me, the researcher, with an understanding of some aspects of the resit phenomenon. As pointed out by Mason (2002), different ontological perspectives might tell different stories and different epistemologies have different things to say about the principles and rules by which the social phenomenon can be known.

From the literature review, it is clear that the ontological components of A-level resits are a lot more complex than the mere actions of individual students resitting examinations in A levels. To start with, the students' actions are related to their attitudes, experience, behaviour and motivation. They can be influenced by their school or college, which, in itself, is associated with social elements of culture, control, practices, responsibility and social relations. As for A levels, they are not solely about the tangible components of structure, rules and system. A levels have their roles in society and are associated with values, control, expectation, social influence and social interaction, as for other high-stakes examinations. In other words, people's knowledge, views, understanding, assumptions, experience and social interactions form a significant part of the ontological properties of A-level resits, which requires interpretation and one

way to learn about the resit phenomenon is from people's accounts of their experience with resits. As pointed out by Knorr-Cetina (1988, p.30), "the outcome of social episodes depends not so much on the pattern of rules and social attributes which 'structure' the situation, but on the values participants place on these structural variables as they are represented and interpreted in the situation". I have, therefore, decided to use an interpretivistic approach which, according to Mason (2002), is about seeing people, their interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings, as the primary data source. The aim is to understand the resit experiences of the individuals, to analyze the social relations and processes which necessitate them and to investigate their outcomes.

Bhaskar (1998c, p.xvi) argues that "in contrast to the hermeneutical perspective, then, actors' accounts are both corrigible and limited by the existence of unacknowledged conditions, unintended consequences, tacit skills and unconscious motivations; but in opposition to the positivist view, actors' accounts form the indispensable starting point of social inquiry". People's actions are enabled and constrained by social structures, but, in turn, they also reproduce and transform those structures (Porter, 1993). In other words, people are not passive objects of social events but are also agents and producers. As discussed in the literature review, a desirable way to get to know about resits is through the accounts of students. The knowledge of how students view resits, how they make use of them and how their resit actions affect their learning will provide a picture of the phenomenon of A-level resits and that knowledge, in my opinion, is a critical one worth investigating. The essence of an actor-oriented approach is neatly summed up by Long:

> An actor-oriented approach entails, as the phrase suggests, an orientation towards understanding social phenomenon from the point of view of social action and perception, which implies giving due recognition to individual strategy and understanding. But it also requires the analysis of emergent social forms that result from a mix of intended and unintended actions, as well as the understanding of how macro-representations and phenomena shape social behaviour and individual choice.
>
> Long (1992, p.277)

My focusing on the students' accounts does not imply that I am only interested in the individuals or I am ignoring the influence of the social context. On the contrary, the

emphasis of the research focused more on the societal processes and social interactions than on the psychological mechanism. As emphasized by Scott (2000, p. 29), "rejecting both over-socialised and over-individualised perspectives is central to any proper development of social theory and furthermore to the adoption of a coherent methodology". The subjectivity of the students' accounts can be due to external social forces, such as school influences and university selection preferences. These were explored in the research as facilitating or constraining factors in the students' resit behaviour, through the accounts of form tutor/senior managers of the schools and colleges (known collectively as 'college managers' in the report), teachers and university admissions tutors.

The strategy of the research can, therefore, be described as a qualitative study using an interpretivistic approach to investigate the practices of A-level resits in sixth-form education in England based on the accounts of students, college managers, teachers and university admissions tutors, with a view to exploring their effects on student learning.

3.6 Research questions

The discussion on the philosophical assumptions and research strategy is not to suggest that one can simply pluck a research paradigm off the shelf for the research. As emphasized by Crotty (1998, p. 216), "as researchers, we have to devise for ourselves a research process that serves our purposes best, one that helps us more than any other to answer our research questions". What the strategy of research has is a close and significant relationship with the type of questions addressed in the research (Yin, 2003). Bryman (2004) suggests that research questions are crucial because they guide the research process and stop a researcher from going off in unnecessary directions. Schostak (2002) likens a research project to projecting a film onto a screen, with the world outside fading away into obscurity: what is picked out shapes the subject of study.

Based on the guiding principles from the literature review, several aspects of research area were identified. I generally followed the four steps of 'going large', 'narrowing the list', 'refining the questions' and 'review' (Green, 2008), by first listing a wide number of questions about A-level resits, then narrowing them down to a smaller list before

refining them to several key research questions. The initial questions focused on how students view resits, how they make resit decisions, what advice and support they receive from their teachers and school or college, how they perform in the resit, and how resits affect their learning in sixth-form education as a whole. As pointed out by Wolcott (2001, p. 40), "part of the strategy of qualitative inquiry is that our research questions undergo continual scrutiny". The last step, 'review', was carried out by me throughout the research, largely by reflecting on the interim findings and thinking ahead of what further analysis was needed. It resulted in another question being added, which concerns how students of differing learning dispositions approach the resit challenge and how the resit experience affects the formation of their learner identity. I then went back to refining the questions by asking myself what was the fundamental issue my research tried to address and concluded that the overarching research questions are:

> How do English students make use of resits in A levels during sixth-form education and what are the effects of resits on student learning?

The sub-questions are:

1. How much do English sixth-form students know about the resit system of A levels, and how do they make resit decisions and perform in the resit?
2. What kinds of advice and support do English students receive from their teachers and school/college in making use of resits during sixth-form education and what are the effects of resits on the students' learning in the classroom?
3. What are the implications of resits for the effectiveness of A levels in their certification and selection roles at the end of sixth-form education in England?
4. How do students of differing learning dispositions approach the resit challenge and how does the resit experience affect the formation of their learner identity?

Details of the process of the development of the research questions are given in ***Appendix 1***.

3.7 Qualitative research vs. quantitative research

Very often, comparisons are made between qualitative and quantitative research. On the face of it, the distinction between the two is that quantitative researchers use

objective quantitative measurement and qualitative researchers do not; their differences, however, are far deeper than this simple dichotomy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Bryman, 2004; Muijs, 2004; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

First, the two approaches use different philosophical assumptions, usually in the form of positivism/post-positivism versus interpretivism/constructionism. Second, the design of a quantitative study is usually predetermined and structured whereas a qualitative design is more flexible, evolving and emergent. Third, there is a difference in terms of the relationship between theory and research. Typically, quantitative research adopts a deductive approach with a focus on experimentation or testing of theories and hypotheses while qualitative research uses largely an inductive approach with an emphasis on the generation of theories. Fourth, there is often a difference in focus. Quantitative research relies on inferential empirical methods and materials whereas qualitative research focuses on processes, meanings and understanding. Fifth, quantitative research tends to use mathematical models and statistics to test theories while qualitative research uses a wide range of methods, including observation, interviewing, first-person accounts, still photographs and life histories, in order to capture the individual's point of view, attitude and behaviour. Sixth, the data sample in quantitative research is usually large, random and representative while that of qualitative research tends to be small and purposeful. Seventh, while quantitative researchers highlight the remote nature of their methods, qualitative researchers emphasize getting close to the research subjects through direct contact or fieldwork. Eighth, quantitative research aims to develop a nomothetic body of knowledge which is time- and context-free and generalizable whereas qualitative research develops idiographic statements in the form of time- and context-bound working hypothesis. Finally, quantitative researchers stress the objective and value-free nature of their research while qualitative researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of social inquiry (see section 3.14 for different criteria in assessing the trustworthiness of research).

Despite their differences, there is no hard-and-fast rule in a definitive distinction between qualitative research and quantitative research; some people regard it as a fundamental contrast while others consider the comparison unproductive (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000; Bryman, 2004). Although not common, there are

exceptions to the general features of either approach. For instance, using examples of quantitative studies which have interpretivistic overtones and qualitative research which posits a formal, objective social reality, Bryman (2004) suggests that the ontological concerns and epistemological issues are not necessarily definitive connections in distinguishing between the two strategies. According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003), qualitative research can sometimes be used to test theories and there are 'mixed model' studies which combine qualitative and quantitative approaches within different stages of a research process. Opie (2004) suggests that research does not always have to be purely quantitative or qualitative but can be somewhere in between the two dichotomies. In recent years, a strategy which adopts a mixed-methods design has been introduced in social research as an alternative to either qualitative or quantitative research (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). More about mixed-methods designs are given in the discussion of research designs later.

3.8 Qualitative data vs. quantitative data

My previous experience in research at the HKEAA was largely quantitative, such as using questionnaires to survey teachers' views about changes to examination syllabuses or conducting experiments in control-group studies to compare marking or grading standards. My interest in the use of interviews stemmed from the experience of a school survey carried out by my office a number of years ago. The survey was part of an exercise to explore the feasibility of introducing teacher-based assessment to a school-leaving (GCSE-equivalent) public examination in Hong Kong. A questionnaire was sent out to some 400 schools and the return rate was over 90 per cent. The result of the survey, based on a quantitative analysis of the schools' ratings of various aspects of the proposal, including the key question of 'will your school support the teacher-assessment scheme', was very encouraging. Nearly three quarters of the schools responded favourably to the proposal. The worries of the schools about the scheme only became evident when I went through the schools' written comments on the questionnaire.

The schools' comments highlighted concerns over many issues, including the consistency of assessment-setting standards between schools, the training of teachers as assessors, teachers' workload and acceptability of the results by users and parents. Although some of these were addressed in the questionnaire, they were represented

largely in close-ended checklists and lacked the originality and explicitness of the written comments. Subsequent to the survey, my office interviewed various teacher/subject groups and held several forums with school heads. The authentic and open views in the qualitative data gathered contributed significantly to the policy decision-making process, not only in terms of whether to go ahead with the scheme, but of when, such as schools' readiness, and how, by recognizing and designing essential measures, including teacher training, standardization procedures, moderation methods and piloting before implementation.

The experience quoted above is not to suggest that qualitative data are better or more appropriate than quantitative data in social research. Quantitative data have their own advantages. Compared to qualitative data, they represent a more convenient and efficient way of data collection and analysis, particularly when large sets of data are involved, and can generally be more objectively interpreted (Muijs, 2004; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). The experience merely highlights possible dangers of relying solely on quantitative data, which can depict too simplistic a picture in their analysis. It resonates with a point made by Mason (1996, p.41), that qualitative data provide an "emphasis on depth, complexity and roundedness in data, rather than the kind of broad surveys of surface patterns which, for example, questionnaires might provide".

Both qualitative and quantitative data can be employed simultaneously in a research project. In other words, adopting a qualitative approach in research does not automatically dictate that only qualitative data will be collected or used and vice versa (Bryman, 2004; Gilbert, 2008). For instance, qualitative research may rely on numerical counts or refer to some kind of a 'norm' in interpreting people's behaviour while quantitative research often measures qualitative meanings and views through the use of attitude scales. As pointed out by Scott and Usher (1999, p.92), "it is not the instrument itself that determines the strategy but the way in which it is employed". Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) suggest that social scientists no longer focus their concern on choosing between qualitative and quantitative data in their research but on how to make use of the most valuable features of each. In this study, I have used both quantitative and qualitative datasets, as will be discussed in the research methods later.

3.9 Qualitative research designs

Qualitative research covers a very broad variety of research designs. Attempts to produce a single definition or a consensus about ways to classify the large varieties have not been fruitful (Patton, 2002) or, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest, are almost impossible. Different types of qualitative research in practice include field study, participant observation, narrative research, case study, grounded theory, action research, ethnography and phenomenology (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, 2005; Creswell, 2009). In reviewing the different qualitative research designs, two seem to be more relevant to my approach than the others. One is case-study research and the other, phenomenological research. Apart from these two, I could also consider my research as one based on a mixed-methods design. After some consideration, I decided that my research is best grouped under what Merriam (1998) describes as a 'basic or generic qualitative study'. I will explain this with an analysis of the different alternatives, starting with case-study designs.

3.9.1 Case study

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 360) ask the question "Just what is a case study?"; they point out that "while the literature is replete with references to case studies and with examples of case study reports, there seems to be little agreement about what a case study is". Ragin (1992) describes a case study as a bounded system, normally by place(s) and time, while Torrance (2005) emphasizes depth rather than breadth in case studies. Merriam (1998) identifies case study as a research design which focuses on a specific phenomenon, with the aim of uncovering the interaction of significant factors characteristic of that phenomenon. Stake (1998, p.86), on the other hand, stresses that "case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied"; it is the researcher who chooses to study the case. With reference to these different ways of describing case studies, I have tried to analyze what constitutes the 'cases' in my research. My investigations were largely based on the accounts of students and academic staff from three schools and colleges in England. Initially, I thought of defining the schools and colleges as my 'cases' but, as I needed also to explore universities' perspectives about resits, I interviewed some university admissions tutors as well. The universities or the admissions tutors are not related in any way to the

schools and colleges, other than the fact that some of the students could have applied there. Their inclusion added some uncertainty about the boundaries of the 'cases' and I decided not to label the research design as a case study. I have, nevertheless, adopted in the research many of the techniques in case studies, such as the in-depth nature of inquiry and the use of multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2003). I also used a case study of four students specifically in part of the research analysis (see Chapter 8).

3.9.2 Phenomenological research

Phenomenological research is another type of research design which seems relevant to my approach because it is a study of people's experience. According to Creswell (2009, p.13), phenomenological research is "a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants". Patton (2002) points out that the focus of phenomenological research is on exploring how people make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning. Crotty (1998) suggests that today's phenomenological researchers tend to gather data by way of unstructured interviews to ensure that the themes pinpointed in the data arise out of the data and are not imposed on them. The difference in my approach from phenomenological research in general is that I have used semi-structured interviews and the emphasis of my research was more on the societal process (e.g. what goes on in the school or college) and social interaction (e.g. teacher-student relationships) rather than on the individuals. Merriam (1998) points out that qualitative research draws from the philosophy of phenomenology in its emphasis on experience and interpretation and qualitative researchers often make use of the 'tools' of phenomenology in their research. Some of the features of phenomenological research are indeed very useful. For instance, the three processes in phenomenological research highlighted by Heinrich (1995); viz., investigation of the phenomenon, identification of general themes or essences of the phenomenon and apprehension of essential relationships among themes, are all relevant. There are also skills to learn from phenomenology in interpreting people's accounts. Patton (2002) stresses that in phenomenological research, "the experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon". During the research, I tried to listen to the interviewees' descriptions of

their resit experience in their own terms and free of my pre-conceptions as far as possible (an example of not making assumptions is given in Chapter 4).

3.9.3 Mixed-methods design

The third alternative is to label my research as one based on a mixed-methods design. Mixed-methods research can be described as using a complementary-strengths thesis in its research framework. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007), it is used when only one approach, either qualitative or quantitative, is inadequate by itself to address the issue under investigation. It involves collecting and analyzing both quantitative data and qualitative data. By mixing the datasets, Creswell and Plano Clark suggest that the researcher provides a better understanding of the problem than if either dataset has been used alone. As will be discussed in greater detail later, I used a student questionnaire and individual interviews in the research. While the quantitative data in the questionnaire were useful in providing information about the students' assumptions and attitudes about resits and laying a foundation for the more in-depth qualitative investigations, the main focus of the research was on interpreting people's accounts about their encounters with resits in the exploration of the effect of resits on student learning. To call the research a mixed-methods study will be convenient but it does not capture the essence of the interpretivistic dimension, which is the key feature of the research.

3.9.4 A basic or generic qualitative study

Classifying one's research in a specific type of design has several advantages, such as giving the reader a rough idea of what philosophical assumptions have been made, how the research was conducted and how the analysis was produced. However, apart from these advantages, it seems to me that, similar to the unhelpful attempts to stereotype or dichotomize qualitative research and quantitative research, it serves no useful purpose to try to delineate different types of qualitative research just to give definitive categories. As pointed out by Patton (2002), the problem of research design poses a paradox in qualitative research: the term design suggests a very specific blueprint but a qualitative design needs to remain sufficiently open and flexible to permit exploration of whatever the phenomenon under study offers for inquiry. Quoting several examples of research studies, Patton suggests that mixing different types and perspectives in qualitative

research is not uncommon and that, rather than adhering to a specific design and sticking to its characteristics in order to fit into that category, researchers are better off focusing on making the best use of various research design 'tools' in their investigations, which then "place the researcher, rather than research techniques, at the center of the research process" (ibid., p. 134). In this regard, I find Merriam's (1998) grouping of some qualitative research in education under the umbrella term of a 'basic or generic qualitative study' sensible and useful.

Merriam names five types of qualitative research most commonly found in education: the basic or generic qualitative study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory and case study. Of the basic or generic qualitative study, she notes the following:

> Many qualitative studies in education do not focus on culture or build a grounded theory; nor are they intensive case studies of a single unit or bounded system. Rather, researchers who conduct these studies, which are probably the most common form of qualitative research in education, simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved.
>
> Merriam (1998, p.11)

According to Merriam, a basic or generic qualitative study encompasses the essential characteristics of qualitative research; viz., the goal of eliciting understanding and meaning, researcher as primary instrument of data collection and analysis, use of fieldwork, and an inductive orientation to analysis. Typically, its findings are a mix of descriptions, interpretations and analysis, resulting from identifying recurring patterns in the form of categories, factors, variables and themes that cut through the data or in the delineation of a process. These characteristics correspond well to my approach, in particular, the interpretivistic nature of the research, the fieldwork and the strategy for the data analysis. I have, therefore, decided that, if I were to put a label to my research design, it would best be described as a basic or generic qualitative study.

3.10 Research methods

According to Crotty (1998, p.3), research methods are "the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data related to some research question or hypothesis". Gerson and Horowitz (2002) stress the importance of choosing the appropriate research

methods because in most cases, they represent a one-off opportunity for the researcher to collect data. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest that the choice of research methods in qualitative research generally depends on the researcher's commitments and talents, the social settings and the aim of the research. Correspondingly, I have identified three factors which I consider important in choosing the research methods for this study.

3.10.1 Reasons for choosing questionnaires and interviews

First, as a researcher, I have to be comfortable with and competent in using the specific methods. Individuals are trained and experienced in different ways. People have different skills in observing the social world. Amongst the different research methods in social research, including interviews, questionnaires, observation, documents and audio-visual materials (Creswell, 2009; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003a), I chose questionnaires and interviews because I have designed and used questionnaires on several occasions before and I have experience of interviewing people, albeit not necessarily all for research purposes. A second factor is that the specific method has to be available or accessible to the researcher and manageable within the given resources. As my research topic is fairly topical, I was confident of getting some schools and colleges to participate in the research. Since it was a self-funding project and I was the only researcher, I wanted to keep the cost down within a sensible timeframe. The use of questionnaires and interviews was, therefore, also a practical choice as I was able to design the questionnaire and conduct the interviews myself. The third consideration concerns fitness for purpose. Most literature (e.g. Bryman, 2004; Creswell, 2009) gives examples of the appropriateness of different methods for different kinds of research and highlights the relationship between methods, research strategy and the research questions. The questionnaires and interviews were used in a strategy designed to collect data in different ways which supplemented each other in order to address the issues contained in the research questions and sub-questions.

3.10.2 Research-method strategy

The research-method strategy was as follows:

1. A questionnaire survey was administered to a sample of 267 Year 13 students in three education institutions England in order to gather data about the students' assumptions about resits, advice received from their teachers and others and how

they made resit decisions (the first and second sub-questions). The sample was made up of students who volunteered to complete the questionnaire in their institutions; details of participation of the institutions and the administration of the questionnaire exercise at each institution are given under section 3.12.1. The questionnaire data were then used in preparation for the student interviews, including selection of interviewees and drawing up the interview schedules.

2. Fourteen individual in-depth student interviews were conducted to collect information on how the students made use of resits, the support from their teachers and others, how they did in the resits and how resits affected their learning during sixth-form education (the first and second sub-questions). Other than making sure that there was a mix of gender, college, subject, exam attainment and number of resits, the students were chosen randomly from amongst the 166 participants (62%) who indicated on the questionnaire their agreement to participate in the interview.

3. Interviews of the teachers, college managers and university admissions tutors (three each) were conducted to find out how schools and colleges viewed resits, how teachers advised their students and how universities viewed resit results. Initially, the focus was on finding out the facilitating or constraining factors in the students' resit actions including school influences and university selection preferences (section 3.5 refers). After the student interviews, it became clear to me that the students' resit decisions and practices were closely related to their approaches and attitudes to learning. Issues about student learning were therefore included in the interviews of college managers, teachers and university admissions tutors. The aim was to investigate the learning practices and resit strategies in sixth-form and the implications of resits for the effectiveness of A levels in their certification and selection roles (the second and third sub-questions).

4. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, the students were interviewed three times over a period of seven months in order to capture their complete resit experience. The brief longitudinal element of the interviews enabled me to conduct an in-depth analysis through the use of a case study of four students of how students of differing learning dispositions approached the resit challenge in A levels (the fourth sub-question). Four different approaches to resits were identified: (i) as a chance to rectify shortcomings in the previous examination, (ii) as another attempt at the examination but without knowing how to or why, (iii) as a valued

> opportunity to improve the results through revision and (iv) as another chance to try one's luck at the examination. The four case studies exemplified these differing approaches and were identified through a careful reading of the interview transcriptions of the fourteen students together with reference to entries in the reflexive journal which recorded my impression of the individual students' learning dispositions and their approaches to the resit challenge throughout the interviews.

Year 13 students were selected for practical reasons. According to the QCA report (2007a, para.2), "nearly all GCE resitting activity relates to AS units". At the start of Year 13, all the students would have sat their AS units and some of them might decide to resit, either in January or June. The idea was to capture the students' resit experience in the January examination in Year 13.

3.10.3 Providing checks and balances

Apart from producing data for the research, the research-method strategy also aimed to provide checks and balances in data analysis and findings (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). This was achieved in two ways.

The first was to use both qualitative and quantitative data. The student questionnaire contained quantitative data (attitude scales) as well as qualitative data (open-ended responses). It gave an overall picture of the students' views and assumptions about resits and their resit decision-making process. The interviews provided qualitative data with an openness and flexibility that enabled some of the questionnaire findings to be further explored and new findings to be generated. Although the questionnaire and interview data were collected separately, their findings were put together in the overall analysis to see if they supported, reinforced or challenged each other.

The second way was to use data from different sources, including students, teachers, college managers and university admissions tutors. I also made reference to sources from other documents, including government policies and public surveys. The objective of using different sources was to provide triangulation which, according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), helps to improve the trustworthiness of the research findings. It is acknowledged that the aggregation of data from different

sources does not necessarily add up to producing a complete picture (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983) but, on the other hand, the perspectives of different people help to provide a more comprehensive account of the phenomenon (Arksey and Knight, 1999). As pointed out by Yin (2003), the tactics of using multiple sources of evidence, establishing connections between them and building up and cross-checking explanations in the data analysis, help to improve the research's credibility.

More details of how I executed the research-method strategy are given in Chapter 4. In the following section, I will describe some of the practical issues about field research (Silverman, 2000).

3.11 Research access, sampling, setting and researcher's role

3.11.1 Access and sampling

Access to the research participants was my main concern at the start of the research because, in general, research is often seen as an intervention in a social system (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). As my research was based largely on the accounts of students, teachers and college managers, the most convenient means of access to the research participants was via their school or college. According to Pring et al. (2009), the majority of 16-18 year olds study A levels in sixth-form colleges and FE colleges, with the rest in schools with a sixth-form. The QCA report (2007a) suggests that there is very little difference in the scale of resitting behaviour between different schools and colleges, but the support given to students in resit preparation can vary, with more support given by independent schools compared to FE colleges or state schools. My preference was to get schools and colleges of different types to participate in the research as far as possible. The sampling techniques used were 'purposive' and 'convenience' (Bryman, 2004). Purposive sampling is normally used to build up a sample that is satisfactory to the specific needs of the research; the criteria I used were that the schools and colleges were of a reasonable size, offered A-level courses and were interested in resits as a research project. The objective of convenience sampling was to do with the geographic location; the schools and colleges need to be within a reasonable distance for my frequent visits.

3.11.2 The college participants

With an intended sample of three to four, based largely on a balance between data sufficiency, cost and manageability (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000), I wrote to a number of schools and colleges of different types in southern England in May 2008 (a specimen of the letter is given in ***Appendix 2***). Three schools and colleges eventually agreed to participate in the research: an independent school with a sixth-form, a sixth-form college and a FE college[12]. For simplicity, they are referred to as 'college' in the thesis rather than 'school/college' or 'educational institution', and they are known in the report by their type: Independent College, Sixth-Form College and FE College. The colleges were in the top 10%, 30% and 60% respectively in the 2009 A levels league table (Telegraph, 2009b). A comparison of the colleges in terms of their students' performance in the ASs according to the questionnaire data analysis is given in ***Appendix 3***.

3.11.3 The research setting and researcher's role

The research was carried out in a 'closed' setting, with the colleges acting as the 'gatekeepers' of the research participants (Bryman, 2004). The participation of the colleges was entirely voluntary. They practically chose themselves by replying favourably to my letter and their enthusiasm was encouraging. As an example, one college cited this in the reply:

> We would be delighted to assist you with your DPhil research on the impact of resits on student learning. I certainly know that there has been much talk about this issue amongst staff here with opinion divided over whether encouraging pupils to take as many resits as possible is a good idea or whether it does in fact become detrimental to their overall performance.
>
> Assistant to the Headmaster of the Independent College

According to Flick (1998), taking up or being assigned a specific role in research can be seen as a process of negotiation between the researcher and the research participants. Mertens (1998) describes three roles of a researcher in the context of studying children in schools: supervisor, leader, or friend. I did not have any authority or involvement

[12] One comprehensive school with a sixth-form initially agreed to participate but withdrew afterwards, citing busy workload at the school as the reason for the withdrawal, by which time it was too late and difficult to find a replacement as schools were well into their autumn term.

with the colleges to assume an official or supervisory role, so my role as a researcher in this study was that of an outside 'friend'. I viewed my role to be that of an 'informative' kind, as opposed to 'educational' (Hammersley, 2003), and I tried to be non-judgmental, which according to Silverman (2000), is often a key to acceptance in many settings.

3.12 Fieldwork

In the next section, I will describe how I carried out the research at the three colleges and how I approached different universities for the interviews of admissions tutors. A record of the fieldwork timetable is given in ***Appendix 4***.

3.12.1 The questionnaire exercise

After securing their agreement for participation, I visited the colleges individually in September 2008 to explain in greater detail the purpose of the research and discuss the arrangements for data collection, including the questionnaire exercise and individual interviews. At the start, I was assigned a project coordinator by each college: the assistant principal of the Sixth-Form College, the student manager of the FE College and the assistant to the headmaster of the Independent College. The arrangement helped me a lot initially but the support started to fade slightly as the data-collection process, which took nearly a year, progressed.

The questionnaires were delivered by me to the three colleges in October 2008. The number of questionnaires issued to each college was discussed and agreed with the college beforehand, largely depending on the college's size and the number it wanted to do. The students' participation in the questionnaire was voluntary. The exercise was administered by the form tutors at each college (the aim was to produce a mix of students with different choice of subjects), shortly after the students had registered for resits in the 2009 January examinations. A total of 550 questionnaires was issued, 200 each for the Sixth-Form College and FE College and 150 for the Independent College; altogether, 267 questionnaires were completed and returned (excluding four incomplete questionnaires). The overall return rate was 49 per cent but the individual return rates varied quite significantly, from 26 per cent for the Sixth-Form College to 49 per cent for the FE College and 76 per cent for the Independent College. The exceptionally low

return rate of the Sixth-Form College could be due to a lack of monitoring of the exercise there (judging from the coordinator's response, it seemed that the forms were simply passed onto the form tutors and it was up to them whether or when to administer the questionnaire). I drew the college's attention to the low returns at the first deadline, which I then extended for another two weeks, but the overall return was still low.

3.12.2 The student interviews

Based on the questionnaire responses, eighteen students (six from each college), who all indicated on the questionnaire their willingness to participate in the interview, were chosen randomly (apart from ensuring a mix of gender, examination attainment and number of resits) and invited through their college for the individual interviews. Only fourteen students (eight boys and six girls) eventually took part; details in ***Appendix 5***. Although I had made it clear to the colleges at the start that the students were chosen randomly and I could easily select a replacement should a student decline to participate, there was little follow-up action from the Sixth-Form College and FE College, where only four students each participated in the interviews.

The fourteen students were each interviewed three times, between November 2008 and May 2009, all inside their own college. Making arrangements for the interviews, particularly the second and third ones, was not easy. Except for the Independent College, I was asked to contact the students direct and I did that by email, having obtained the addresses from the students with their consent in the first interview. One thing I have known about teenagers from experience with my own children is that they are not always reliable, and the students in this study were no exception. There were several times when the students were either late or did not turn up at all. They knew that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research. Their excuses were that they had forgotten about it and their apologies seemed sincere, so I could only put it down to absent-mindedness or carelessness for their being late or absent. I lost one student at the Sixth-Form College after the second interview but that was because she discontinued her study and left the college. Booking a quiet place for the interviews was especially difficult at the Sixth-Form College. The interviews themselves, however, were very informative and useful, and this took away much of the disappointment and frustration from booking difficulties and missing appointments.

3.12.3 Interviews of college managers and teachers

The assistant principal of the Sixth-Form College, a form tutor of the FE College and the head of sixth-form of the Independent College were interviewed in June 2009 for an hour each. For simplicity, they are referred to as 'college managers' in the thesis and they are identified individually by their college; viz., SF-College, FE-College and IND-College in the quotations. Three subject teachers, one from each college, were interviewed in June 2009, also for an hour each. They were nominated by their college and happened to be teachers of different subjects: Psychology from Sixth-Form College, Mathematics (Maths) from FE College and Physical Education (PE) from the Independent College. They are identified by their subject in the quotations. The aim of the interviews was for the college managers to provide the college's perspectives from the 'pastoral care' viewpoint while the teachers' interviews focused on the teaching of the subjects. All the interviews were very constructive and useful. I was slightly surprised by the frankness of the participants, particularly the teachers, who were very forthcoming with their views and gave their answers in greater detail than I anticipated.

3.12.4 Interviews of university admissions tutors

With the aim of interviewing admissions tutors from different courses, I approached two universities through personal contacts and managed to interview three admissions tutors: two (Medicine and Computer Science) from the first one, a Russell Group university, and one (Social Work) from the second, a 1994-group university, both in England. All three admissions tutors were interviewed in June 2009 for an hour each; they are identified by their course in the report. Their courses are very popular, with offer conditions ranging from three Bs to four As. I tried to arrange interviews with admissions tutors from universities whose entry requirements are less demanding (e.g. Bs and Cs). Through contacts of my supervisors, I approached two post-1992 universities but, despite a promising start with possible names of officers I could interview, I failed to make any appointment after a number of email exchanges over the months of June to August in 2009, by the end of which the universities were busy with admissions and did not respond to my email at all. Later, I was informed indirectly (through one of my supervisors) that the contact person of one of the universities had commented that their admissions are done fairly mechanically nowadays, based largely on certain set criteria of A-level results with no interviews and the role of admissions

tutors in making selections has become much diminished. Since the focus of the interview was on how universities view A-level resit results in admissions selections and assuming that less-competitive and less-demanding university courses are unlikely to turn away student applicants simply because they have taken resits, I decided not to pursue any more interviews with admissions tutors, having already got fairly rich data from the three interviews conducted.

3.13 Ethics

While I was working on the research proposal in early 2008, I came across a newspaper report about a psychiatrist being found guilty of conducting unethical tests on mentally ill patients (Times, 2008). The psychiatrist was accused of recruiting his patients and carrying out unauthorized tests on them without giving them adequate information about the tests and without the proper approval of relevant medical and ethical committees. That report was a typical example of how research participants could be manipulated, deceived, or even harmed, physically and/or mentally, and it highlighted the importance of ethics in research.

3.13.1 Deontological and consequential issues

Ethics is a crucial aspect of all research. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) stated in its ethical guidelines that educational researchers should "weigh up all aspects of the process of conducting educational research within any given context…. and to reach an ethically acceptable position in which their actions are considered justifiable and sound" (BERA, 2004, para.3). According to Kvale (1996), ethical issues are present throughout the research process: at the start, during the research and at the reporting stage. They could be deontological or consequential (May, 1997; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000; Murphy and Dingwall, 2001).

Deontological issues relate to the conduct of the research itself and generally cover the nature of the project, the treatment of the participants and how information or data are collected. In general, the researcher's responsibilities include identifying the purpose of the research, legitimatizing access to the research participants, being sensitive to the interviewer-interviewee differences, ensuring voluntary informed consent, respecting the interviewee's right to withdraw and safeguarding the confidential and proper use of

the research data (Mason, 1996; Patton, 2002; Gillham, 2005). How I dealt with these issues is covered in the section under 'overt access and data confidentiality' below.

Consequential issues deal with the outcome or the 'ends' of research. The researcher's responsibilities are about what is to be done with the data and their findings, including confidentiality of the research data and anonymity of the research participants. Very often, they are related to media attention or publishing of controversial findings. Due to its topical nature, my research has caught the media's attention. I was approached through the University of Sussex by two different national newspapers, the first in April 2009 and the second in August 2010. I did not give any interview, the first time because I was still in the middle of data collection and the second time because I was away presenting a paper at an international conference. Back in August 2009, I wrote a letter to the Editor of the Times about the hard work of teachers and students being undermined by the assumption that resits automatically mean better results. The letter was published on 26 August 2009 (***Appendix 6***). Afterwards, another FE college contacted me via the university and expressed interest in participating in the research. As I had already completed the data collection and could not afford spending another year on an additional college, I instead sent them a copy of the questionnaire for their own administration (with conditions of copyright and use restrictions) after talking to their vice principal on the telephone about the research purpose and the issues involved.

3.13.2 Overt access and data confidentiality

The investigation in this study was based on overt access. The participating colleges and research participants were all informed of the purpose of the research right at the beginning. In line with the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality principles (Mertens, 1998), I made it clear to the participants that all data collected would be treated in confidence and their identities would not be disclosed, directly or indirectly. These principles were also set out in the letters to the colleges and on the questionnaire. Each interviewee's agreement to participate was obtained in a written consent form (***Appendix 7***), duly signed by me and the interviewee before the start of the interview. To protect the participant's identity, I used a 4-digit numeric code for each questionnaire participant and a fictitious name for each student interviewee. Only the codes and fictitious names are used in the report. As for the others, the college

managers are known by their college (college type), the teachers, by their subject, and the university admissions tutors, by their course, in the report and their quotations.

3.13.3 Interviewing young participants

As the student interviewees were all 17-18 year olds, I was particularly conscious of ethical issues in terms of researcher-participant relationship, such as the power differential discussed by James (2001) between an adult researcher and young participants. In terms of power difference, I did not feel that the students were at all intimidated by me, perhaps due to my researcher role as a 'friend' and not an 'official', or simply because they were 'fearless', typical of most teenagers. On the contrary, it came to me very clearly early on that, if the students did not feel like saying much about certain questions, they would simply give very brief answers like 'yes' or 'no', and it was up to me to prompt them to say more by being patient or asking the question in a more round-about way. The students knew that the project was for my doctoral research and this seemed to work in my favour. They treated me more like their 'senior' rather than an adult of authority. Over the series of interviews, I felt that I had built up good rapport and trust with the students. As the students had spent a lot of time with me (two hours in total), it was my wish to show some appreciation. After checking with their colleges, I gave the students each at the end of the last interview a £6 voucher at HMV (a music and video shop). The students did not expect this and were clearly pleased with the small but friendly gesture.

3.13.4 Sensitive topics

Heyl (2001) highlights some ethical issues in terms of how the research topic and questions are approached, negotiated and responded to (e.g. sensitive subjects, coercion) in social research. It was useful to have a topical subject as the students liked talking about their examination experience in A levels and the teachers were happy to discuss how they advised their students. The college managers were also frank about their views regarding A-level resits; they were, however, reluctant to talk about their college's resit statistics.

The questions of a more personal or sensitive nature for the students were those concerning their relationship with their parents and their parents' educational

background. The students were fairly open about these questions too. For example, four students told me that their parents were divorced, even though I did not ask them about it as it had nothing to do with the research. I felt that they trusted me and just wanted to talk about the support they had from both parents, including the one living apart. On those occasions, I simply listened before going onto other more relevant areas, such as whether they talked to their parents about taking resits.

3.13.5 Ethics checklists

These days, checklists on ethics for research purposes are commonplace. They are published in literature (e.g. Patton, 2002), by professional organizations (e.g. BERA) and by academic institutions (e.g. the Sussex Institute). May (1997) points out that rigid and inflexible sets of ethical rules may impose unnecessary constraints on research whereas a loose and flexible system may be ineffective in preventing unscrupulous behaviour by some researchers. Notwithstanding the usefulness of checklists, it has been stressed that ethics is not just about ticking the right boxes but about the researcher's awareness of potential conflicts and being reflexive to possible consequences in the research process (Kvale, 1996; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). As part of the research proposal, I completed a checklist on ethics issued by the Sussex Institute (SI) in 2008. A copy of the SI checklist, including the ethical requirements and the corresponding actions taken, is summarized in ***Appendix 8***. The SI checklist was referred to frequently throughout the research, not only to ensure that the requirements were appropriately met, but also to remind myself about ethical issues at different stages of the research[13].

3.14 Trustworthiness of qualitative research

3.14.1 Traditional conventions to evaluate quantitative research

The mission of my former office, the HKEAA, is to 'provide valid, reliable and equitable examination and assessment services' (HKEAA, n.d.). Validity, reliability

[13] During the research, I was aware of the more up-to-date ethical review processes at the University of Sussex, such as the checklists in the application form for projects which require ethical review; and I made sure that the requirements (low risk project), such as anonymity and informed consent, were appropriately met.

and equity (or objectivity) are of great importance in examination administration (Wood, 1991; Black, 1998). Reliability refers to how dependable the generalization of one individual's performance is in a particular examination. This is because examination results may come out differently due to errors in marking, variations in grading, and variability of the individual from day to day or from question to question; reliability aims to minimize the occurrence of these errors. Validity is extremely important because it does not matter how reliable an examination is if what it assesses is irrelevant to what it sets out to measure. There are many forms of validity; they generally fall into three categories: content validity, construct validity and consequential validity (including criterion, predictive and concurrent validity). Equity or objectivity is needed in examinations to ensure equal opportunities; i.e. that no candidate is favoured or discriminated against due to race, gender, class or disability. For example, examination questions must avoid favouring a particular gender or race and special centre arrangements are made to accommodate students with disabilities.

In layman's terms, the mission of the HKEAA means that the examinations set should measure what is relevant according to their intentions and produce consistent and dependable results in a fair, objective and unbiased manner. In essence, the aim is to provide a service that can be trusted by users of the examination results. Validity, reliability and objectivity are the traditional conventions or criteria used by quantitative researchers to evaluate their work (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000); public examinations can be seen as a quantification of students' achievement and should, therefore, be subject to the same scrutiny. Whether the same set of criteria should be applied to qualitative research is a different matter, and often controversial.

3.14.2 The issue of subjectivity and objectivity

While qualitative research is generally viewed as different by nature from quantitative research, it is often judged by the same standards (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative studies are sometimes treated as fiction rather than science and the credibility of the statements made in them or their generalizability is often challenged. The concern about subjectivity versus objectivity is often raised when qualitative research is compared to quantitative research. It has been suggested that since the

primary instrument in qualitative research is human, it is subject to the perception and bias of both participants and researcher and hence, subjectivity (Merriam, 1998).

According to Bourdieu (1993), sociological language can never be 'neutral'. People hardly ever use the 'is' statement when talking about the social world but the 'ought to' statement. Discourse about the social world, no matter how descriptive, is always likely to be perceived as 'performative' because "readers read sociology through the spectacles of their *habitus*" (ibid., p.23, original emphasis). All social actors, including social researchers, have their own habitus and that in turn, can condition their views and opinions (more about Bourdieu's concept of habitus is given in Chapter 8). For Bourdieu, while the social world is known to the individuals by their perception (subjectivity), there exist certain defining principles (objectivity) which are both pre-constructed and evolving; the issue is how social structure and individual agency can be reconciled (Grenfell, 2008; Maton, 2008).

Scott and Usher (1999) contend that, unlike natural sciences, social research, as a social practice, is itself a meaningful human action constructed through interpretive frames. It can be argued that, in a way, the setting of criteria to evaluate social research is in itself a social action which involves meanings and interpretation. As pointed out by Bowen (1977), objectivity is itself a value; it represents a normative standard or, as Harding (1978) puts it, the way to maximize objectivity in social inquiries actually calls upon specific moral and political values. Phillips (1993) argues that objectivity is not a property of the individual researcher but the property of the context of justification, and is dependent upon communal acceptance of the critical spirit; what is crucial is for qualitative researchers to demonstrate the great care and responsiveness to criticism, such as examination of personal biases with which the research has been carried out.

3.14.3 Alternative criteria to evaluate qualitative research

Increasingly, many qualitative researchers (e.g. Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Mason, 2002) argue that a different set of criteria from quantitative research is called for when evaluating qualitative inquiries. As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.294), "different basic beliefs lead to different knowledge claims and different criteria". An argument is put forward by Howe (2004) who, by making reference to the use of a

medical research methodology as a model for educational research, contends that there are major differences between doing quantitative research in medical research and doing qualitative research in education. He points out that 'dispensing a pill' is quite different from 'dispensing a curriculum' and the precision with which outcome can be measured between 'a 10-point reduction in diastolic blood pressure' is not the same as 'a 10-month growth in mathematics understanding'.

Using arguments including a multiple-constructed social reality, the time- and context-bound nature of working hypotheses in qualitative research, the trade-off situation between control in internal validity and generalization in external validity, and an emphasis of objectivity on data rather than on the investigator, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that the conventional criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity are not applicable to qualitative research but should be replaced respectively by truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality. In general, there is a wide range of terms used by researchers to evaluate qualitative inquires, including authenticity and attestability (Brown and Sime, 1981), generalizability, transferability, and fittingness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and trustworthiness, credibility, confirmability, and dependability (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998).

In what he called a 'reflexivity reflex', Bourdieu (2004) stressed that social scientists must be epistemologically vigilant, by applying to their own practice the 'objectivating' techniques they apply to the other sciences. For Bourdieu, a focus on either a subjectivist approach or an objectivist approach which overlooks the significance of the other will likely lead to a skewed interpretation of the social world (Grenfell, 2008). Bourdieu suggested that by increasing the cross-controls and providing the principles of a technical critique, reflexivity can provide an effective means of keeping a close watch over the factors capable of biasing research. As Hammersley (2007) points out, the issue of establishing quality for qualitative social research is about 'what', not 'whether'. According to Bryman (2004, p.276), most qualitative researchers nowadays tend to "treat their account as one of a number of possible representations rather than definitive versions of social reality" and they bolster their accounts through certain strategies or techniques.

3.14.4 Techniques for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research

Silverman (2001, p.189) puts the issue of trustworthiness of qualitative research in the form of these questions: “Have the researchers demonstrated successfully why we should believe them? And does the research problem tackled have theoretical and/or practical significance?”. In a similar vein, Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.290) ask, “How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of? What arguments can be mounted, what criteria invoked, what questions asked, that would be persuasive on this issue?”. These are some of the questions qualitative researchers need to address in order to establish the trustworthiness of their research. In this regard, Lincoln and Guba suggest several techniques for qualitative researchers; they include the practices of prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checks, thick description, audit trail and keeping a reflexive journal. I found these techniques very useful, not only in establishing trust by the reader in the research, but also in helping me, the researcher, monitor the research process. Many of the measures have been adopted throughout the research project, as described in various parts of this thesis.

3.15 Summary

In this chapter, I have described the methodological framework, the research questions, the research design and the research-method strategy. I started with the philosophical position in terms of what I wanted to know about resits in A levels and how I planned to acquire that knowledge, which were then translated into the research questions and led to a strategy of adopting a basic or generic qualitative study based on an interpretivistic approach to investigate the practices of resits in sixth-form education using the accounts of students, college managers, teachers and university admissions tutors, with a view to exploring the effects of those practices on student learning. The strategy of using questionnaires and individual interviews as the research methods was also discussed. This was followed by an examination of some issues in fieldwork, including research access, sampling, setting, my role as a researcher and ethics. The chapter concludes with a discussion of an issue all qualitative researchers need to confront, which is how to establish the research’s trustworthiness.

4 Data production, analysis, interpretation and reporting

4.1 Introduction

Research methods denote the ways in which data are produced, analyzed, interpreted and reported (Dunne, Pryor and Yates, 2005). This chapter discusses the characteristics of questionnaires and interviews as research methods, the way I made use of them in this study and some of their limitations. It concludes with a description of how I developed and reported the research findings.

4.2 Questionnaire

A questionnaire is a collection of questions administered to respondents; it is generally used in research for its efficiency in terms of its potential to include a large number of respondents and identify underlying patterns quickly (Bryman, 2004; Dunne, Pryor and Yates, 2005). Oppenheim (1966, p.49, original emphasis) emphasizes that the function of a questionnaire is "to elicit a *particular* communication". Questionnaires are usually developed and administered with particular forms of quantification and numerical analysis in mind. The design of the questionnaire, including its aim and purpose, as in 'what it wants to measure', is extremely important in the successful use of questionnaires.

4.2.1 Designing the questionnaire

Communication is significant in creating the questionnaire text, which is the single point of contact with the respondents. Most literature highlights the need for good phrasing of individual questions in terms of clarity, transparency and avoidance of ambiguity, as well as a good presentation structure in the text demarcation (Oppenheim, 1966, 1992; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

The design of the student questionnaire can be described as 'analytic' (Oppenheim, 1992), i.e. it asks not only 'how many' (e.g. how many units the student was resitting) but also 'why' (e.g. why did the student resit). The focus of the questionnaire construction was on choosing the appropriate question types for individual questions, the question order and the potential of the questions for statistical analysis. The

questions were worded using some of the techniques described by Oppenheim (1966, 1992), such as keeping the questions short, avoiding double-barrelled questions and leading questions. They were phrased in an informal and direct manner in line with my researcher's role as a 'friend'. Both 'factual questions' and 'attitude questions' were used. The aim of the factual questions was to provide classifications for analysis (e.g. gender, subjects). The attitude questions were used to measure the students' views and attitudes about various issues regarding resits, (e.g. importance of different factors in resit decisions).

I used different question types and response modes in designing individual questions (Oppenheim, 1992; Bryman, 2004). The closed questions include dichotomous questions (e.g. gender), multiple-choice questions (e.g. post-Year 13 plan) and rating scales or checklists (e.g. difficulty of resit decision). With their standardized sets of answers, closed questions are relatively easy to process and analyze. In contrast, open questions, in which the students answer in their own words, are much more time-consuming in data capture and coding (categorizing and numbering of the responses), and are harder to interpret. They also demand more effort from the respondents, as reflected by the paucity of data given by the students in response to some of them (e.g. resit reasons). On the other hand, they allow freedom and spontaneity of the answers, as evident from the variety of the students' responses (e.g. teacher's advice) and have the advantage of authenticity, candour and expressiveness, as demonstrated by the varied choice of phrases and argument used by the students (e.g. whether resits are fair). Overall, I found the checklists and rating scales the hardest to design as they required a lot of effort in ensuring that the lists were exhaustive, appropriately worded and clearly presented, and piloting was essential.

4.2.2 Piloting

The questionnaire was piloted to check for clarity, meaning and fitness (Mertens, 1998; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). In early August 2008, I invited the daughter of a friend, a Year 13 student, and five of her schoolmates[14] to complete a pilot questionnaire and, afterwards, a short feedback survey (***Appendix 9***). The feedback was

[14] The students were from an independent school, with A-level attainment ranging from 3As to Bs and Cs.

encouraging. As one student wrote in the overall comment: "it covers a lot of different aspects of resits", which was exactly the objective of the questionnaire. The feedback showed that the students found the questionnaire 'quite interesting', 'very clear' and 'about right' in length; they took between 8-10 minutes to complete the questionnaire and did not have any difficulty understanding or answering any of the questions. Afterwards, I made a few small amendments to the questionnaire, largely to make it neater and to fit it onto four A4 sheets, which were then double-printed on A3-size papers (each was then folded in the middle), instead of having five loose sheets stapled together.

A copy of the questionnaire is given in ***Appendix 10***. The questions, grouped under different parts according to their purposes, are summarised below:

Table 4.1: Structure of the student questionnaire

Part	Questions	Question types	Purpose
1	1-8	open-ended/ close-ended	Personal data (for classification)
2	9-10	close-ended/ checklists/ rating scales	The student's knowledge of resits
3	11	close-ended/ open-ended	The student's resit decision and reason
4	12-17	open-ended/ close-ended/ checklists/ rating scales	The student's resit-decision process (timing, difficulty of decision, factors in decision-making, teacher's advice, discussion with parents)
5	18-19	open-ended/ close-ended/ checklists	The student's view of the resit system (fairness, whether they want it to continue)
6	20-22	close-ended/ checklists/ rating scales	Post sixth-form (plan after Year 13, views about factors in selections by university/employer)
7	23	rating scales	The student's views of different aspects of sixth-form education

4.2.3 Data entry, analysis and presentation

The questionnaire data were entered manually in a data file and analyzed using the statistical software, SPSS for Windows (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 17. The data-entry process was tedious and time-consuming. Each of the 267

student records has 167 variables (see ***Appendix 11)***, excluding re-codes and temporary codes for analytical purposes. The data were checked both manually and by using simple frequency statistics, such as checking if any of the values entered were outside the acceptable range of individual variables (Pallant, 2007).

Coding (see for example, Bryman, 2004) was necessary for many of the open responses, either for protecting the identity of the research participants (e.g. student codes), classification for analytical purposes (e.g. subject codes) or grouping open answers into categories (e.g. reasons for resitting). A copy of the questionnaire dataset code-book is given in ***Appendix 12***. Re-coding was also needed for some data. For example, many codes were used initially to categorize teacher's advice so as not to lose the original information; the codes were then re-coded into fewer categories for reporting (e.g. grouping 'no advice at all' and 'very little advice' into one category).

The questionnaire captured a lot of information but not all the data collected and analyzed were used in the report findings. For instance, the vast majority of the students learned about resits from their teachers and, since it was largely a single source, the variety of the information source was not considered significant and its analysis was therefore not included in the report. Also, the analysis was based on the entire 267 participants. Breakdown by different units of analysis, such as gender and ethnic origin, was generally not included (except where considered appropriate) because there was either not much difference between the different groups (e.g. between gender) or insufficient data for some of the categories (e.g. students of non-white ethnic origin). I have, however, included a full set of questionnaire data analysis in ***Appendix 13*** for completeness's sake and for the readers who are interested in various statistics.

Statistics using frequency, cumulative percentages, means, medians and cross-tabulations were the main statistical tools used in the data analysis. Chi-square tests were also carried out to check whether the difference in the likelihood of resitting was significant between different attributes in various groups (e.g. between different colleges, different gender). The SPSS software was easy to use for entering data and generating statistical analysis. I used Microsoft Excel for the presentation of the results because I have more experience using it and transferring files from SPSS to Excel is

easy. From experience, I used mainly bar charts rather than tables in the statistical presentation because they are easier to read and interpret. Issues identified in the questionnaire analysis which required further investigation, such as reasons for resitting and factors in resit decisions, were explored in the interviews. The questionnaire findings were then combined with those of the interviews in the final report.

4.2.4 Limitations and potential bias

There are several limitations and potential biases in the questionnaire findings and these are highlighted below.

4.2.4.1 Systematic bias and representativeness

The Sixth-Form College had a much lower return rate (26%) than those of the other two colleges (49% for the FE College and 76% for the Independent College). It is acknowledged that since the questionnaire was administered to a purposive rather than a random sample and participation was voluntary, the questionnaire findings are subject to systematic bias and issues of representativeness. Caution must, therefore, be taken in interpreting the analysis results due to the self-selecting sample. Nevertheless, a group of 267 participants in total is generally considered sufficiently large and varied to suggest that the findings do not necessarily happen by chance (Connolly, 2007).

4.2.4.2 Resit statistics and likelihood of resitting between groups

According to the questionnaire responses, 88 per cent of the students were resitting in Year 13. The results of the chi-square tests show that there was no significant difference in the likelihood of students resitting between genders or between students taking different subjects. In other words, girls were as likely to resit as boys and students taking History were as likely to resit as students taking Mathematics (or English or Chemistry). The difference between colleges was found to be significant (Chi-square=16.749; df=2, p=0.000). This was not surprising as the resit percentage of the FE College (98%) was much higher than those of the Sixth-Form College (77%) and the Independent College (84%). However, only AS resits in Year 13 were included in the analysis. Many students, particularly those from the Independent College, had already taken some resits in Year 12. The overall resit statistics (both Year 12 and Year 13) could, therefore, be higher for some colleges and the difference between colleges,

smaller. With hindsight, I could have included a question asking the students to indicate whether they had taken any AS resits in Year 12, but I still would not be able to find out the number of possible resits of A2 units in Year 13 (unless I did the questionnaire near the end of Year 13 but the timing would have rendered doing the interviews afterwards impossible). I did, however, ask the college managers for their college's resit statistics but all of them were very vague about them and claimed that their college did not keep a complete record of all resits and that it was up to individual teachers and subject departments to monitor the situation.

4.2.4.3 Attitudes as measured by the rating scales

Rating scales were used to measure the students' attitudes towards different aspects of resits and various factors in their resit decisions. According to Oppenheim (1966, 1992), rating scales are useful in measuring attitudes; they are relatively crude measuring instruments and chiefly function by dividing the respondents roughly into a number of broad groups with regard to a particular attitude. The measurement usually approaches an attitude from one particular direction and may give rather one-sided results. That effect, however, can be reduced by using several items in the measurement, as was the case with the student questionnaire in this research. For example, I used six items (representing six aspects) in the measurement of the students' attitudes towards the difficulty of their resit decisions. The primary concern is unidimensionality; i.e. a high rating for each aspect of the resit decision (e.g. hard decision, took a long time, had to consider many factors, etc.) would indicate that the student considered the resit decision-making difficult.

Likert scales were used as the rating scales in the questionnaire. In Likert scales, the respondents were asked to choose between several response positions which indicated the extent of their agreement or disagreement (Oppenheim, 1966, 1992). The five positions on the Likert scale[15] were given weights between 5 (extremely accurate/important/influential) and 1 (not at all accurate/important/influential). A high score indicates that the students had a highly positive attitude towards the accuracy/importance of a certain item/statement while a low score means that the

[15] According to Oppenheim (1996), five positions were used as more complex scoring methods had been shown to possess no advantage.

students had a very negative attitude towards it. An 'average rating' (a rating of 3) indicates a midway point between the two extremes in the student's attitude.

Frequency statistics of the students' ratings were used in the overall analysis. Although the rating data are ordinal in nature (Connolly, 2007), the statistical means, rather than the medians, were used in the report to highlight the finer rating differences between individual factors, on the assumption that the students had a similar understanding of the relativity of each of the ratings on the 5-point scale (e.g. what 'extremely important' meant to them individually).

4.2.4.4 Changes to the AS/A2 system

The Year 13 students in this study were among the last cohort of students taking the 3-unit AS/A2 system. Starting from the 2010 examinations, the number of units for each AS and A2 module was changed from three to two and A* grades were introduced (QCDA, 2009). Since the general arrangements and rules of resits have remained unchanged (i.e. no resit limit or penalty), the change in the number of assessment units and the introduction of A* grades are not considered to have significantly affected the findings of the questionnaire, such as the students' reasons for resitting or their views about fairness of resits (nor those of the interviews, such as the students' revision tactics). The most likely difference could be in the number of units resitting.

The questionnaire findings were generally supported by the interviews, to which I will now turn, starting with an examination of the use of interviews in social research and how I used them in this study.

4.3 Interviews

Interviews are widely used in a broad range of social contexts (Briggs, 1986; Keats, 2000; Schostak, 2006). For instance, in our daily lives, we regularly interview others (e.g. asking shopkeepers for information), act as interviewees (e.g. answering questions by medical doctors) or observe the use of interviews (e.g. watching news on television). Increasingly, interviews are used in society for market research, political opinion

polling and academic analysis. As Atkinson and Silverman (1997) suggest: we now live in an 'interview society'.

4.3.1 Different types of interviews

Interviews represent one of the most common methods of collecting qualitative research data. More than twenty years ago, Briggs (1986) estimated that interviews account for 90 per cent of all social investigations, typically in anthropology, psychology, sociology, linguistics, political science and oral history. He suggests that an implicit reason for researchers choosing interviews as a research method is because "interviews allow the researcher to assume control of the type and quantity of information being conveyed" (ibid., p.39).

Two types of interviewers are described by Kvale (1996): as a 'miner' or as a 'traveller'. The 'miner' interviewer excavates knowledge from the interviewee: it is largely a one-way exercise. An example of this can be found in highly structured interview surveys. The relatively minor impact of the interviewer on the interviewees' responses is attributable to the inflexible, standardized and predetermined nature of such interviews. But, as pointed out by Fontana and Frey (2003), even under these conditions, good interviewers recognize that all interviews are social interactions, the context of which can influence the interviewees' response and the interview outcome. Very often, interviews are more than a tool to collect information; they represent a complex process involving people in specific social contexts (Schostak, 2006). Oppenheim (1992, p.67, original emphasis) suggests that "the job of the depth interviewer is thus *not* that of data collection but *ideas* collection". The purpose of in-depth interviews is not merely to excavate knowledge, but to construct it, and both the interviewer and interviewee are co-participants in that process. In this sense, the interviewer has become what Kvale (1996) calls, a 'traveller' with a story to tell.

There are many different types of interviews (Briggs, 1986; Gillham, 2005). They can be carried out with a single person (e.g. autobiography, life history), a group of people at different times (e.g. oral history, case studies) or a group of people at the same time (e.g. focus group, brainstorming). They can be one-off or sequential. They can take a variety of formats, ranging from the most informal open-ended interviews in

ethnography to formal instruments in survey research, from standardized and scheduled interviews to non-standardized and unscheduled interviews, from structured interviews to semi-structured or unstructured interviews, and from video or telephone interviews to face-to-face interviews. The choice depends on the nature of the research, the questions to be answered, the theoretical frame and the positions of the researcher and research participants (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002; Dunne, Pryor and Yates, 2005).

4.3.2 The 3-interview approach for the student interviews

The main source of data for this research came from the students. I have considered various ways of interviewing them, including focus groups and structured interviews. In the end, I decided that an effective way to study how students made use of resits and how resits affected their learning was not by asking them discrete questions in one interview session, whether individually or in groups, but by going through the resit process with them individually and capturing their views, attitudes and experience at different milestones of that process. The structure of the interview can be described as a modified version of Seidman's (1991) '3-interview method' using Schutz's (1972) 'time span of action' theory.

According to Schutz (1972), there is a significance about the time span in human actions. Using a simple example of a person turning a door-knob, Schutz argued that the action itself gives an observer very little meaning or understanding of that action. The person could be going out of a room or merely turning the door-knob to see if it works. Until the action is complete, for example, when the person actually turns the door-knob and leaves a room, we can then come to an understanding of the meaning of that person's action. Similarly, in defining an A-level resit as an action, I did not view it simply as the action of a student resitting an examination in A levels, which could last between 2-3 hours; rather, I treated it as a complete process, from the time a resit decision was made to when the resit result was known.

Seidman (1991, p1) says that stories are a way of knowing: "telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process". For Seidman, a basic assumption in in-depth interviewing is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience. A 3-stage interview is used by Seidman so that the interviewees can reflect

on their experience after they first describe it; the structure enhances the trustworthiness of the interview data because it places the interviewees' comments in context by allowing them time to make sense of their actions.

Using Schutz's theory and Seidman's approach, I interviewed the students at three stages, each taking about 40 minutes (one period) in the student's college. The first round of interviews took place in November 2008, after the students had registered for resits in the January 2009 examinations. The aim was to get to know the individual students, including how they viewed their progress into sixth-form education, their understanding of the resit system and how they made resit decisions. The second interviews took place in February 2009, after the students had taken their resits. The objective was for the students to talk about their resit experience, including how they prepared for the examination and what kind of support they had from their teachers and parents. The third interviews took place in April and early May 2009, after the students had received their resit results. The students were encouraged to reflect on their resit experience and to make sense of their resit actions, including whether they considered the resit worthwhile and how they viewed its effect on their study.

4.3.3 Interviews of other stakeholders

Other interviews were carried out to investigate the effect of teachers' influences and universities' selection preferences on the students' resit actions. The interviews of college managers, teachers and university admissions tutors were conducted in June 2009 for about an hour each. These interviews provided different perspectives about resits, such as how colleges viewed resits as a policy, how teachers advised their students on resits, whether resits affect teaching and learning and whether universities took resits into account in admissions selections. Their data were also used to cross-check some of the findings of the student interviews.

4.3.4 Piloting and interview schedules

I used semi-structured interviews for all the interviews so that the interviewees could tell their stories freely and openly and at the same time I could ensure that the issues I wanted to address were adequately covered.

According to Mertens (1998), preparations, such as piloting and interview schedules, help towards improving consistency of the interview data. I did a pilot student interview while I was working on the research proposal in early 2008. I wanted to see whether and how the 3-interview structure worked before committing to it. The daughter of a friend (the one who helped with the pilot questionnaire) was studying in Year 13 at the time and was about to resit two units of AS Chemistry in January. She agreed to help me with the pilot. I interviewed her face-to-face twice, first in early January and then in February (for about 40 minutes each), and then on the telephone for the third interview in April (about 10 minutes). The pilot interviews were fruitful. They showed me that having a series of interviews before and after the resit examination was useful. I was able to experience first-hand the process from how the student made her resit decision in the first interview to how she viewed her resit experience in the second and how she justified her resit decision in the third. The student improved her result in both units in the resit. She blamed herself for taking a lax attitude and not trying harder in Year 12 and was happy that she was given a second chance. From the pilot, I identified a number of issues for investigation in the research and incorporated them into the student questionnaire and interview schedules.

In accordance with the respective aims of the three rounds of student interviews described earlier, separate interview schedules were prepared for individual rounds. Each time, a 'basic' schedule was first drafted and modifications were then made to suit the individual students (e.g. follow-up questions from questionnaire responses or earlier interviews). The same approach was used for the interviews of college managers, teachers and university admissions tutors (adjustments made for different colleges, subjects or courses). Altogether, six 'basic' interview schedules were prepared and copies of these are given in ***Appendix 14***.

4.3.5 The interviewing process

4.3.5.1 Time and expenses

Interviews can be costly and time-consuming (Gillham, 2005). My expenses were largely limited to travelling and printing costs since I did all the interviews myself and was able to borrow a good digital recorder and have free access to a data-analysis software (Nvivo 7) from the University of Sussex. This, however, did not include a

costly mistake I made on a software package. Given that transcriptions could be very time-consuming (I spent about ten hours transcribing the 90-minute pilot interviews), I invested £100 on a voice-recognition software on a friend's recommendation and on the assumption that the software would cut down significantly the interview transcription time. More details about this will be discussed under 'transcription time and method' later.

Time-wise, Gillham (2005) estimates that, including all the preparation work, analysis and writing, the total time involved in research for a one-hour face-to-face interview is, on average, 20 hours. I had spent about 37 hours on the conduct of 50 interviews and at least 250 hours on transcription. Considering the additional time spent on preparing many different interview schedules, travelling and waiting, and working on an analysis which involved lots of coding, I reckon that the total time of 740 hours according to Gillham's calculation was likely to be an under-estimate in my case.

4.3.5.2 Interviewing techniques

Interviewing is a specialized technique and the skill of the interviewer is paramount to its success. As Seidman (1991, p.56) puts it, "technique isn't everything, but it is a lot". For instance, even when we want to tell the truth, such as answering our doctor's questions as best we can, it will require an experienced doctor to ask the 'right' question to find out the nature and cause of our illness, particularly if the symptoms are obscure. The general advice for interviewers in social research as found in most literature is to be prepared, to concentrate on listening, to be non-judgmental, to demonstrate interest in the participant's story, to learn when to probe, to clarify and to elaborate, and also to be conscious of non-verbal messages, such as facial expressions, eye contact and gestures (Brenner, 1981; Oppenheim, 1992; Keats 2000; Gillham, 2005). All these techniques are very useful and I applied them to the interviews as far as possible.

Briggs (1986) suggests that reflection is important in the interviewing process and periodic checks should be carried out on the effectiveness of one's interviews. I learned a few things about interview techniques and my own weaknesses during the eight months of interviews, particularly in the first round of student interviews. Firstly, I found out during the interview transcription that, when a student was quiet or gave very brief answers, I tended to speak more and was sometimes too chatty. It was likely that I

was a bit nervous and uncomfortable with silence or prolonged pauses. Fortunately, as it was my preference and practice to transcribe interviews soon after they had been carried out while the conversations were fresh on my mind, I discovered this quite early in the exercise. I was then able to adjust my approach in subsequent interviews, such as by being more patient and using simple probing questions like 'please tell me more about that'. Secondly, I noticed that I was fairly rigid in the early interviews and there were the occasional awkward pauses when I tried to locate the reference on the interview schedule. I changed the practice in the later rounds by reading the interview schedule and the transcript of the student's previous interview at the college immediately before the interview, so that I remembered them well and only referred to them occasionally during the interview. The interview became less mechanical and I was able to listen more and was more aware of emerging patterns or new ideas. Thirdly, I learned not to make assumptions at any time (i.e. bracketing my own pre-conceptions). For example, in response to the question of whether universities viewed resits favourably in admissions selections, my own assumption from previous experience was that resits, like repeating, were treated as failures (at least in the sense of requiring more than one attempt to achieve a certain grade) and universities would therefore likely take this into account as a disadvantage. While this seemed also to be a common view among the students interviewed, one student thought that resits could be viewed favourably by universities because it showed that the student did not give up easily and had put in additional efforts to try again. Whether universities take that view or not is not the point in this regard; the point is about not making blanket assumptions, which may or may not hold. I have learned to suspend my own judgement, ask the 'presumably obvious' question, and listen.

As a result of the lessons I learned, gaining more experience and generally knowing the students better, it was clear that the student interviews went much more smoothly and productively in the later rounds. By the time I interviewed the teachers, college managers and admissions tutors, I was more knowledgeable about how resits were used by the students and was more confident with my interviewing technique. Instead of sticking fairly rigidly to the interview schedule, I was able to be more proactive, responsive and engaging during those interviews.

The 3-interview structure also helped me in another respect: organization of the interview timetable. In the first round, I learned quickly that some students were more open and forthcoming with their views than others. I therefore tried to schedule interviews with them early in the second and third rounds as far as possible, so that any interim findings from their interviews could be further explored or developed with the subsequent interviewees to see if they had similar (or opposing) views and experience. That practice seemed to work and I was able to expand the interview schedules to include fresh ideas and new findings as the interviews progressed.

4.3.6 Transcription

All the interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and the files containing the recordings were kept on computer for transcription and record. The interviewees were told of the recording requirement at the beginning of the interview. None of them seemed concerned about it. This could be due to the general acceptance of interviews, including video interviews, nowadays. As suggested by Warren (2002, p.92), the 'interview society' seems to have "constructed a new, postmodern, social context for interview data, perhaps making the interview itself the characteristic format for personal narratives".

4.3.6.1 Transcription time and method

According to Powers (2005, p.2), the reason for transcription is "to record, to illuminate, to represent, and to facilitate analysis". Transcripts are a useful tool for analysis of interview data but transcription can be very tedious and time-consuming. Powers reckons that transcribing an hour of recording may take anywhere between 3-24 hours, depending on the transcription requirements. As mentioned earlier, initially I used a voice-recognition software (Dragon Naturally Speaking V.10) to transcribe the interview data. Had it worked, it could have saved me a lot of time because all I had to do was to listen to a section of the recording and then repeat it to the computer via a microphone, i.e. the time of transcription could be as little as doubling the time of recording. However, I stopped using it after transcribing the first round of student interviews because it was unreliable and incurred extra work from rectifying mistakes made by its 'automatic correction' function, which did not work well with conversations (the software treats them like written English). So, after the unsatisfactory experience, I

reverted from 'listening and speaking' using the software back to the traditional method of 'listening and typing'.

Depending on the individual interviewees (e.g. accent, speaking speed, softness of speech, etc.), I needed between 5-7 hours of transcription time for each hour of interview. I tried, as far as possible, to transcribe a whole interview in one go, within a day or two of the interview. This way, I was able to listen to the whole recording without interruption and it gave me a general idea of the interviewee's views and a gist of the issues discussed. I then wrote an entry in a journal to record my thoughts, what questions to ask in the next interview, points for analysis, etc.

4.3.6.2 Transcription designs and symbols

Before transcription, I consulted some literature on transcription designs (e.g. Chafe, 1993; Du Bois et al., 1993; Edwards, 1993; Silverman, 2001), the general underlying principle of which is to provide good readability, easy access, consistency and analyzability. Common standards are needed especially for documents intended for conversation or discourse analysis. As the transcripts were solely for my own reference and data analysis, I only made use of a few of the standard practices. An example of the transcript, which shows the identification of the interview and interviewee, the numbering system of the text of speech for reference and the use of symbols in the text, is given in ***Appendix 15***.

Symbols are a useful tool in transcription. As commented by Powers (2005, p. 11), "turning spoken words into text flattens speech; removes emotion, emphasis, and tone of voice; and strips out context". Symbols help to simulate the transcript to the live exchange as closely as possible by including indications of pauses, intonation and non-verbal expressions (Chafe, 1993; Du Bois et al., 1993, Silverman, 2001). Again, as the transcripts were largely for my own reference, I only made use of some of the conventional symbols, many of which are not relevant (e.g. multiple speakers, terminal pitch directions, vocal noises, accents) and too many would make very lengthy transcripts. As suggested by Dunne, Pryor and Yates (2005), the researcher decides in the process of preparation what is and what is not noteworthy, which will then be reflected in the analysis. The conventional symbols which I found useful and necessary to capture the interview exchange in sufficient details are listed in Table 4.2 below. I

added two other symbols (my own adaptation) which I used when quoting interviewees' responses in the report.

Table 4.2: Symbols used in interview transcripts and in quotations in the report

	Symbol	Meaning	Usage
Symbols* used in the transcripts	.. …	Short pauses Medium or long pauses	Indicates pauses in the speech; usually it shows that the interviewee found the question difficult to answer or wanted more time to think before answering.
	[ ]	Speech overlap	Indicates words spoken while the other person was still speaking; it usually shows impatience of the interviewee or incidence when the interviewee thought of something and wanted to say it immediately, hence the interruption.
	( )	Non-verbal expressions	Inserted in brackets, these include short laughter, sighs, etc.
	- --	Incomplete word Truncated intonation	The interviewee started a word or a projected intonation unit but abandoned it before finishing; it usually shows less-straightforward answers and the interviewee was still thinking about it when he/she started answering.
	Punctuations	Intonation contours	Some interviewees could talk for a long time without a full stop (finality), so plenty of commas (non-finality).
Symbols used in the quotations in the report	….	Omission of some texts	Parts of the speech (either repetitive or irrelevant to the purpose of the quotation) were omitted in the quotation.
	(( ))	Author's descriptions rather than transcriptions	Words inserted (not part of the speech) to show the context of the point(s) made in the quotation.

*Source: Chafe (1993); Du Bois et al. (1993)

4.3.7 Data analysis

According to Wolcott (1994, p.3, original emphasis), "the real mystique of qualitative inquiry lies in the processes of *using* data rather than in the processes of *gathering* data". Wolcott suggests three ways of dealing with data: description (what is going on), analysis (how things work) and interpretation (what is to be made of it). He emphasizes that the three are not mutually exclusive and all three are often used in the

transformation of interview data into research findings. The interview data, as captured on the transcripts, gave me a good description of the different practices concerning resits. The process of transforming those data and their descriptions into the research findings involved a tedious but interesting and challenging analytical process which included interpretation: coding.

4.3.7.1 The coding process

According to Bryman (2004), coding is necessary in order to analyze research materials in an unstructured form, such as open responses in questionnaires or interviews. Ryan and Bernard (2003, p. 275, original emphasis) describe coding as "the heart and soul of *whole-text analysis"*. The coding process of interview data involves numerous steps of reading, sampling, identifying themes, building codebooks, marking texts, constructing models of relationships among codes, re-reading, reviewing and testing the models against empirical data. In short, it is a method of analysis of interview data by linking data to ideas and then from ideas back to supporting data; the objective is to identify emerging themes and concepts (Bazeley, 2007).

I used the computer software Nvivo (version 8) for the coding process; it provides useful tools for classifying, sorting and arranging information. I first focused on the student interviews and used the entire text in each transcript as the unit of analysis. In looking for concepts or categories, I started with some general themes derived from the interview schedules and entries in my journal. In general, I adopted a broad-brush approach (Bazeley, 2007) by selecting 'chunks' of text from the transcripts into broad topic areas. The texts were then 'tagged' with codes to facilitate later retrieval. During the close reading of the transcripts in the coding process, I also looked for additional conceptual codes and themes. The process was then repeated with the transcripts of the other groups of interviewees (teachers, college managers and university admissions tutors), during which texts related to codes established from the student interviews were tagged, additional codes were generated and the linkages between codes were studied for connecting themes.

By sorting out what was broadly said about each theme by different interviewees, I was able to determine whether there were sufficient variations or significance in specific themes or concepts to be further pursued with more fine-grained coding, to check for

emerging patterns and to build theories by connecting different themes and concepts. I used the Nvivo software to safeguard against 'anecdotalism' (Bryman, 2004), by checking the sufficiency of evidence in support of the themes developed. I looked specifically for consistencies as well as variations in the interviewees' responses, in terms of both 'intra-interviewee' (between different interviews of each student) and 'inter-interviewees' (between interviewees); exceptions to the common patterns were then included in the report as appropriate. The whole coding process involved a lot of reading, reflecting and re-reading. The coding under each theme and connecting themes were stored in 'nodes' and 'tree nodes' in the Nvivo program. I often re-read the entire text in individual transcripts to check the context of the quotations in order to avoid data fragmentation (selective coding) and to cross-check some of the findings generated. Conversely, by going over the node listings and summary reports, I could also check the data quoted in the context of the category, rather than the original source, in order to ensure coding consistency. Queries were used at a later stage to check for connections and repetitions between codes. A summary of some of the nodes and tree nodes used in the coding is given in ***Appendix 16***.

4.3.7.2 Analysis using case studies

The process of coding was used generally to look for answers to the first three research sub-questions, the results of which are given in Chapters 5 to 7. For the fourth sub-question, which deals with the students' learner identity and their approach to the resit challenge, I used a case study of four students. The full transcripts of the three interviews of the individual students were analyzed, together with their questionnaire data, by going over the transcripts in detail and using a working template (***Appendix 17***) to capture the students' responses to some common themes, their individual actions and variations in their approaches. The findings are given in Chapter 8.

4.3.8 Limitations and potential bias

Interviews involve people and are subject to human bias. In research which employs more than one interviewer, inter-interviewer variations can affect the consistency of the interviews (Briggs, 1986). While this was not an issue in my case, there could still be variations in how I carried out the interviews with individual interviewees. Standardization of the interview questions may promote consistency but true

standardization can only be achieved if the meanings of the questions are the same for each respondent (Fontana and Frey, 2003). As emphasized by Briggs (1986), each interview is unique and involves a negotiation of the social roles and frames of reference between the interviewer and the interviewee, who are often total strangers to each other. The point is echoed by Schostak (2006), who stresses that an interview is an encounter which involves negotiation, calculation and interpretation by both the interviewer and the interviewee.

Briggs (1986) suggests that interviewer-induced bias can reduce the credibility of the research findings and it is, therefore, important to alert readers to it. Various limitations and potential bias in the use of interviews generally come under four main categories: interviewer-interviewee relationship, personal factors, interpretational bias and knowledge generated from interview data (Silverman, 1985; Keats, 2000; Gillham, 2005; Schostak, 2006). These are discussed below with reference to how I approached them in the study.

4.3.8.1 Interviewer-interviewee relationship

Schostak (2006) points out that the term 'inter-view' implies a mutual interviewer-interviewee relationship. With reference to an 'I-thou' relationship or reciprocity of perspectives, Seidman (1991) suggests establishing a personal 'we' relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer; thus, the respondent is no longer an 'object' or a 'type' but an equal participant in the interaction. A key issue in the interviewer-interviewee relationship is what the interviewees think is at stake for them because this may cause anxiety and aggression in some cases or attempts by the interviewees to please the interviewer in others (Briggs, 1986). One way to lessen bias in this area is by creating mutual trust which, as suggested by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), is often the key to success in acquiring information in research because people are often more concerned with the kind of person the researcher is than with the research itself.

The purpose of my research was made clear to the interviewees at the beginning of the interview. They knew I was a research student working on a project the objective of which was to examine the practice of resits and its implications. I emphasized that I was there not to evaluate or judge them or their practice but with the sole interest of

finding out how resits were used in sixth-form education. My impression was that they trusted me as an independent researcher with no hidden agenda. The students generally saw themselves as research participants to help me with my project whereas the teachers, college managers and admissions tutors were interested in the research topic and wanted to have their opinions heard.

In terms of whether the interviewees told the 'truth' or withheld information, I found all of them generally open and frank, including answers to some sensitive questions, such as whether resitting students saw themselves as 'failures' or whether teachers encouraged resits. The only exception was that on certain topics, I found the college managers slightly cautious (e.g. whether they kept resit statistics in their college) and defensive (e.g. whether their college had a policy on resits). This could be due to how they viewed their roles, as 'guardians' of their college's culture and practices.

4.3.8.2 Personal factors

Personal factors, such as age, gender, race, personality and interactional styles of both interviewers and interviewees, can influence the interviewees' responses and the research outcome (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003b). Of the fourteen students (8 boys and 6 girls), eleven were white, one was black and two were Chinese. Eight of the nine adult interviewees (5 men and 4 women) were white and one was Chinese. The fact that I am Chinese and a woman did not seem to be a concern to the interviewees. Although I was much older than the students, being a 'student' myself seemed to have helped bridge the age gap, whereas the other interviewees simply treated me as another adult. Obviously, as the solo interviewer, I could only judge it on my own feeling of the situation and would not be able to tell for sure whether the interviewees would be more or less cooperative and informative with an interviewer of another race, gender or age.

In what he calls issues of 'referential' and 'indexical' modes of signification, Briggs (1986) argues that each of us has learned from our individual speech communities various rules that relate form, context and meaning, and there may be situations in which an interviewee has misunderstood the referent in the interviewer's question or differed on the interpretation of the indexical or context-sensitive meanings. My 'Englishness' (being married to an Englishman for many years) in terms of speaking the language, knowledgeable about English culture and understanding how the English

education system works, possibly reduced any differences between me and the interviewees in terms of mutual understanding and interpretation of the issues discussed. On the other hand, on occasion, the vernacular of the teenage students was something new to me, but confined to their style of speech. For example, they used the word 'like' a lot as if to say that what they told me was just an example. They also liked to finish a sentence with 'so' as if to challenge me to differ or interpret it whatever way I liked, or 'that's it' as if to suggest to me that there was nothing more to discuss.

4.3.8.3 Interpretational bias

Gillham (2005, p.6) emphasizes that "inter-subjectivity is at the heart of all social relations, whether in a research context or anywhere else". The purpose of interviews in qualitative research, according to Warren (2002, p.83), is "to derive interpretations, not facts or laws, from respondent talk". Interpretation can, therefore, be an issue for interviews. For example, it is important not to treat the interviewee's point of view as an explanation but, rather, his or her interpretation of the issue. Briggs (1986) points out that the interviewee and the interviewer may each be drawing upon their own interpretation of the meaning of the questions and use that as a frame in their responses and that may affect the interview outcome. To minimize this possibility, Briggs suggests that it is important for both interviewee and interviewer to share the same interactional goal.

The goals of the different groups of interviewees might not be exactly the same but they were all well connected to the research objective. The college managers wanted to know more about the effect of resits on the learning of their students. The teachers needed to advise their students on resit decisions and seemed eager to tell me their practices. The university admissions tutors had to make decisions on whether to consider resitters in admissions selections and were keen to voice their opinions about the calibre of students admitted under the modular resit system of A levels. The students had all participated in the questionnaire exercise and knew the purpose of the interview. I told the students (but not the adults since it might sound patronizing) that there was no right or wrong answer to any of my questions. The students were happy to talk about their examination experience and were candid about how they made use of resits.

As the research subject was quite topical, the interviewees were familiar with (and all had an opinion about) general issues regarding resits, such as the public perception that A levels may have become easier with resit opportunities. The interviewees and I had no difficulty understanding terms, such as 'marking schemes' and 'exam technique', and sharing jargons, such as 'teaching to the exam' and 'bite-sized learning'. There remains, however, possibility of biased subjectivity, in terms of me, the researcher, using my own interpretation of the interview data in the analysis (Kvale, 1996). In reporting the findings, I have included, as far as possible, both conforming and opposing views of the research participants, together with my own interpretation, so as to draw the attention of the readers to the assumptions made.

4.3.8.4 Generation of knowledge from interview data

Interviews provide a rich source of information and knowledge; as Gubrium and Holstein (2002, p.15) suggest: interviews "transform the subject behind the respondent from a repository of information and opinions or a wellspring of emotions into a productive source of knowledge". That information or material, however, does not speak for itself. It needs to be analyzed, classified, interpreted and then presented in a report in order for it to be made sense of; otherwise, the information will merely be descriptive and its meaning left to the interpretation of the individual readers (Silverman, 1985; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002).

Due to the constructed nature of social knowledge in qualitative research, including that generated by interviews, it is understandable that much caution is placed on interpretation and sensitivity on credibility. However, as emphasized by Plummer (2001), while it is important for researchers to be aware of the practical, interpretational and ethical issues, it is equally important to bear in mind that these are issues, not problems. Plummer argues that, if researchers refrain from construction, analysis and interpretation, which involve thinking, reasoning, judgement and reflexivity, their research will become nothing more than a mere description of the data gathered and an excavation of knowledge. This is where a reflexive journal becomes very useful.

4.4 Journal and memos

I kept a reflexive journal during the research project to record my impressions and thoughts during the research which may provide objects for interpretation and analysis later (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Dunne, Pryor and Yates, 2005). The entries to the journal ranged from an analysis of my own performance as a researcher (e.g. my interview technique) to my feelings about certain practices of the interviewees (e.g. resit strategies), impressions (e.g. observation during my visits to the individual colleges) and the difficulties I encountered (e.g. problems in arranging interviews). I also kept memos and records documenting the files of correspondence with research participants, timetable of questionnaire dissemination, interview appointments, consent forms, interview schedules and various coding tables. The overall objective of keeping the journal and memos was to monitor the research process, to provide supporting information in the report writing and to keep a record for audit trail.

4.5 From data to text

As pointed out by Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p.108), analysis is not simply a matter of classifying, categorizing, coding or collating data; "most fundamentally, analysis is about the representation or reconstruction of social phenomena". Research findings are not self-evident. Postmodernists, notably Jacques Derrida, highlight the human side of the researcher and the potential problems of qualitative research, and call for deconstruction of the text created by the researcher's rendition of events so as to expose possible bias and taken-for-granted notions of the writer (Fontana and Frey, 2003). For them, it is not possible to have a description of reality into which the standpoint and interests of the researcher or observer have not entered (Crotty, 1998).

The difference between the postmodern perspective and the traditional approach is highlighted by a debate in 1992 over Marianne Boelen's challenge of William Whyte's account in his 1943 sociological classic, *Street Corner Society* (Whyte, 1955, 1992; Boelen, 1992; Adler et al., 1992). Commenting on the Whyte-Boelen exchange, Denzin (1992) raised an important point about the two accounts: "different stories, same epistemologies".

> The ethnographer's text creates the subject; subjects exist only insofar as they are brought into our own texts.…Things do not exist independent of their representations in social texts….It is this hegemonic vision that must be challenged.
>
> Denzin (1992, pp.124 and126)

Denzin criticized both Whyte and Boelen for failing to question their right to look, ask questions, report on those living in Cornerville, the subject of Whyte's book, and to represent them in their own ways. Reporting is about representation and is thus also an ethical issue. Overt access (as in the case of my study) may be one way of dealing with ethical concerns but that does not take away the influence of the researcher in how the research findings are represented. Obviously, there is always an element of judgement on the part of the researcher (Dunne, Pryor and Yates, 2005). It is, therefore, important for the readers to bear in mind the objective of the research and the researcher identity when reading the research report, both of which are covered in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

4.6 From questions to answers

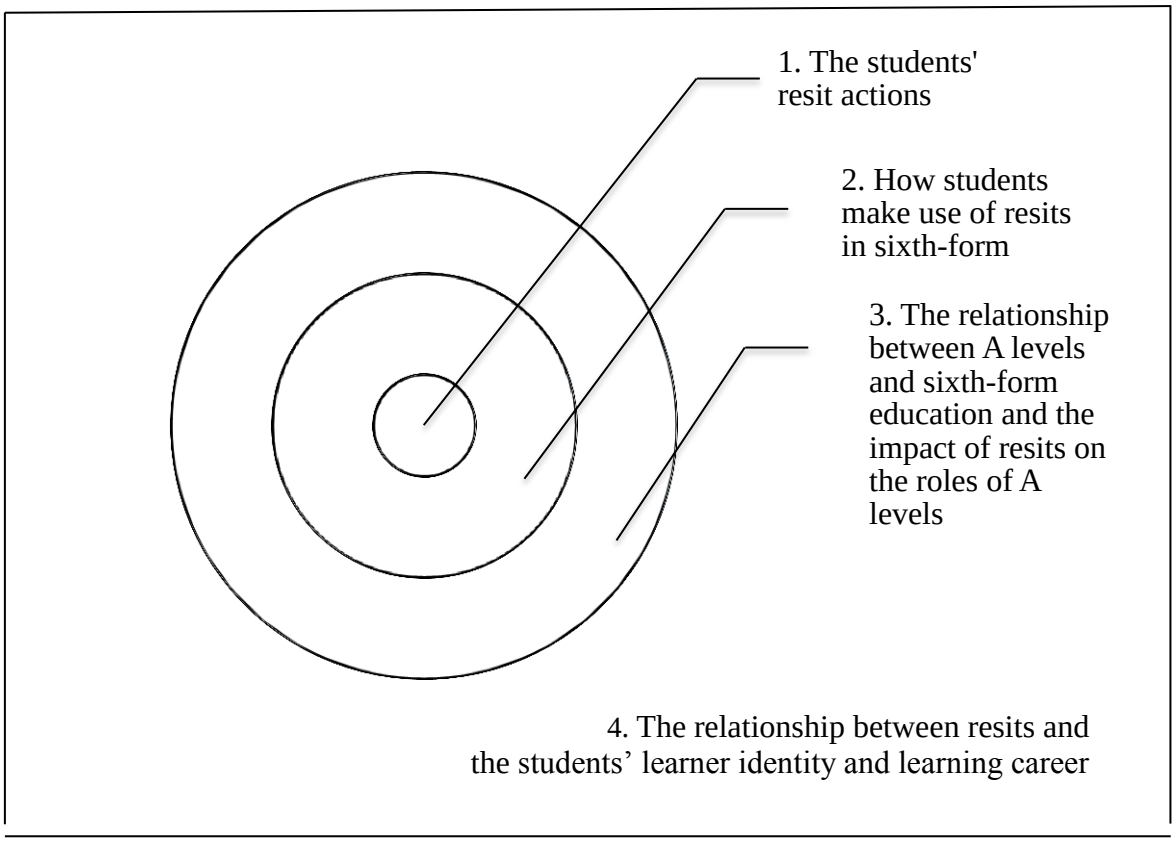
As suggested by Dunne, Pryor and Yates (2005), a research process is 'an engagement with text'. Researchers are both readers and writers, going through the process from constructing text in collaboration with the research participants to deconstructing text through data analysis, interpretation and reflection and, finally, to reconstructing text through selection and recontextualization in the writing of the research report. In this process of construction-deconstruction-reconstruction, I have identified four themes of research findings, representing four levels of analysis, to be included in the research report.

4.6.1 The research findings: four levels of analysis

In formulating the research questions, I used a reference by Schostak (2002) of likening a research project to projecting a film onto a screen, the aim of which is to pick out the centre that shapes the subject of the study. The same metaphor can be used in the analysis. Relating to the research sub-questions are four levels of analysis, the emphasis of each of which depends on where the focus of the camera's lens is, by panning out from one level to another and then zooming back in at each level for the analysis.

The four levels of analysis are depicted in the following diagram.

Figure 4.1: Four levels of analysis in the research findings



The analysis concentrated initially at the centre with a picture of students preparing for and resitting A-level examinations. The objective was to understand how the students viewed resits, why they chose to resit and how they performed in the resit (first level of analysis). When the lens of the camera was panned out slightly, the picture of the students learning in the classroom came into view. The analysis focused on how the students made use of resits in sixth-form and what advice and support they received from their teachers (second level of analysis). When the lens was panned out even further, the picture of the two years of sixth-form formed the bigger picture. The analysis examined the relationship between A levels and sixth-form education as a whole and the impact of resits on the effectiveness of A levels in their certification and selection roles (third level of analysis). Finally, when the lens was panned all out, the students' learning career filled the screen. The analysis looked at how the students' learner identity affected the way they approached the resit challenge and the impact of

that on their learning career (fourth level of analysis) and this was done by using the cases of four students in an in-depth case study.

4.6.2 Reporting the findings: to quote or not to quote

In reporting the findings, the choice was between 'to quote or not to quote'. If I were to present the findings using entirely my own words, the reading may be less disruptive but the readers would have to trust me that the findings have been derived truthfully from the data albeit with my interpretation. On the other hand, if I were to quote the participants, it would show authenticity and credibility; however, it might come across as if I needed to rely on the words of others to make my point. Baker (2010, p.30) argues that writers use quotations "not to make our argument but to amplify a point within it". For example, I used the quotations of teachers talking about their need to teach to the examination. Their comments captured not only their reasons (the high-stakes nature of examination results and accountability issues) but also their feelings (almost like resignation). In other words, the quotations of the research participants help to bring to life the points made. I have, therefore, used a fair amount of quotations in the research report. The source of each quotation is given in brackets at the end of the quotation (***Appendix 18***).

4.7 Summary

Questionnaires and interviews are very useful tools in social research but they can also be very time-consuming and tedious in the process of design, data production, analysis, interpretation and reporting, as I have found in this research. They also have certain limitations and are subject to potential bias; keeping a reflexive journal, memos and records has helped me in monitoring the research process and highlighting possible discrepancies or issues. The findings of the research, which were based on the questionnaire analysis and emerging themes from the interviews, were developed under four themes, each of which are covered in Chapters 5 to 8 respectively.

5 The students' resit actions in A levels

5.1 Introduction

The 2007 QCA review (2007a, para. 13) suggests that "to a certain extent, a student can be expected to 'have a go' at resitting" in A levels. Although there is no penalty, resitting an examination can be a waste of time and effort if a student does not understand the system, makes wrong decisions about resits and is poorly prepared for the examination. This chapter discusses the research findings regarding the resit actions of the students involved in the study, including how they made resit decisions, how they viewed resits and how some of them managed to improve in the resits. I will start with some statistics.

5.2 Resit statistics

The QCA review reports that on average, about a third of A-level candidates sat a unit more than once and few sat a unit more than twice. In contrast, a recent survey of sixth-form teachers reports that half or more of the students resat AS/A2 units at least once (de Waal, 2009). The findings of this study suggest that the proportion of students taking resits could be even higher than one-half in some schools and colleges. Of the 267 Year 13 students in the questionnaire survey, 88 per cent were resitting at least one unit, mostly in January. The figures referred only to resits of AS units in Year 13 and did not cover resits already taken in Year 12 or possible resits of A2 units in June. In other words, the resit statistics of the entire sixth-form could be much higher and multiple resits were not uncommon. Half of the students interviewed indicted that they had already resat some units in Year 12 and some were resitting a unit for the third time in Year 13. On average, the students resat nearly two subjects each (1.9 subject) and more than one unit (1.3 unit) per subject.

The questionnaire results showed a resit pattern (see Table 5.1 below) which covered the full grade range, but mostly at the top, with half of the students resitting having already achieved a grade A or B in their original AS result.

Table 5.1: Resit pattern by original AS subject grade

AS grade before the resit	% of students	Accumulative %
A	19.8	19.8
B	30.6	50.4
C	25.7	76.1
D	15.4	91.5
E	6.4	97.9
U	2.1	100

The relatively high proportion of students resitting at the upper grades could be due to the colleges being above average in the A levels league table, especially in the case of the Independent College, where very few students scored below grade C (***Appendix 3***).

5.3 Students' knowledge about resits

The students were asked four questions about resits on the questionnaire, including the maximum number of resit attempts and units, who pays, and what happens to the resit result. On average, the students answered 3 questions correctly. They were most knowledgeable about who pays for the resit and the 'replace result only if better' rule.

Table 5.2: Percentage of students answering correctly questions on resits on the questionnaire

Question on the questionnaire	% of students who answered it correctly
How many times can students resit?	58.4%
How many units can students resit?	65.5%
Who pays for the resit?	93.6%
What happens to the resit result?	87.6%

According to the questionnaire survey, 95 per cent of the students used information provided by their teachers as the main source of information about resits and the rating they gave to the usefulness of that information was 4.0 on a 5-point scale. The students interviewed also said that they learned about resits mainly from their teachers, usually after the first examination in Year 12. The amount of information tended not to be very detailed, as shown by the comments of the following students:

> *We were just told we can resit but we don't know how many times, that wasn't really got explained. (Cathy:1:19)*

> *The main thing is the teachers saying to you that you can resit this time and then it's not the only time you can, that's all. (Liz:1:20)*

According to the students interviewed, there was no general briefing or printed guidelines about resits in any of the colleges. All three college managers were reticent when asked about their college policy or guidelines regarding how they advised their students on resit decisions; the common response was that there was no hard-and-fast rule and it was the students' choice based on the advice of their teacher.

> *Yes, we would advise students to resit if they feel they can improve and that would be on the advice of the subject teacher…. We don't insist, it's up to the student to talk through with their parents. (SF-College:8)*

> *I always thought it's the students' choice…. I think the teachers advise the students and they are in charge of entering students for resits. (FE-College:16)*

> *No ((there is no policy))…. All we ever say to them is do the best you can each time. (IND-College:11)*

My impression was that there was a concern about students taking a lax attitude towards their first examinations, as shown in the comments of the following teachers:

> *We don't tend to ((mention resits)) at the beginning of the year. But we would mention it when students who have taken their first-year exams and continuing onto A2, and are thinking about trying to improve their chances. (Maths:27)*

> *We try not to mention it too much. They know, they say what if I fail, and we tell them you can resit but we don't talk about it a lot because it's better that if they don't resit they can do well. (Psychology:31)*

Their comments matched the perception of the students, as shown by the following remark:

> *I think the staff try to keep the resit system under their thumb; they don't want to tell you too much in the first few months because they obviously want you to try and do well. (Frank:3:48)*

The absence of clear guidelines could be the reason for the variation in the advice given by individual teachers to their students about resits, as will be discussed later.

5.4 Views about fairness of resits

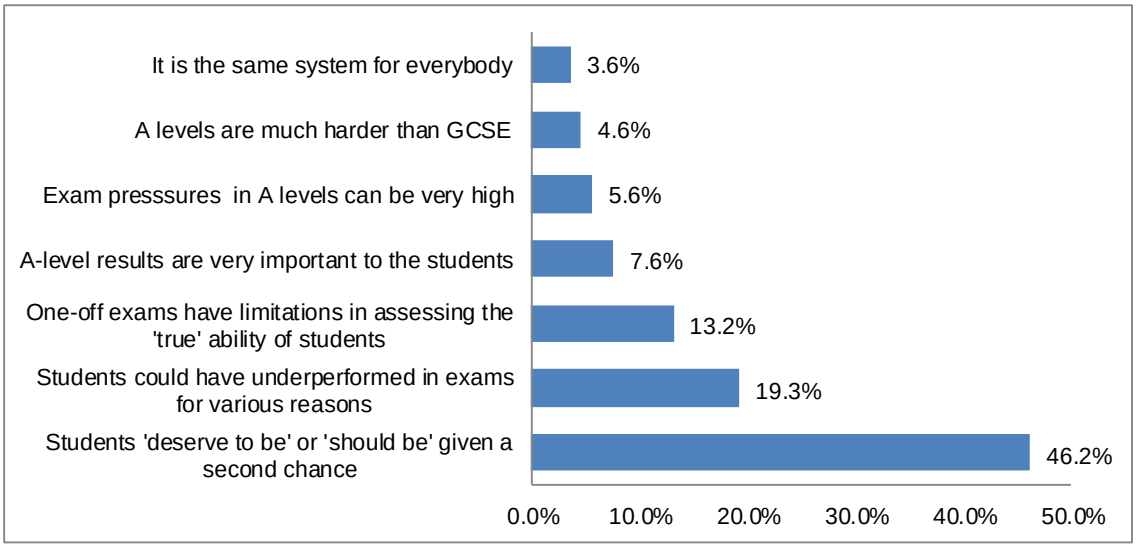
5.4.1 Views of the students

How the students viewed resits could affect their resit decisions. 94 per cent of the students in the questionnaire survey wanted the resit system to continue. In both the questionnaire and interviews, the students were asked how they viewed resits in terms of fairness.

Only 6 per cent of the students in the questionnaire survey thought that the resit system was not fair; their main reason was that it was unfair to those who had worked hard and got good results in the first examination.

On the other hand, 94 per cent thought that the resit system was fair. The students' reasons were grouped broadly into seven categories, summarized below.

Figure 5.1: Students' reasons as to why the resit system is fair



The majority of the students' reasons (68%) was about the significance and difficulties of A levels, nearly half of which was that students 'should be' or 'deserve to be' given a second chance. The other 32 per cent indicated a deeper understanding of the rationale behind the resit system; i.e. the limitations of public examinations and that some

students could have underperformed for various reasons. Some of the questionnaire responses are shown below:

> *Sometimes you can just have a bad day and to have two years of work resting on one exam isn't always going to be representative of your true ability. (4079)*
>
> *Exam papers differ each year, and on the particular day the candidates may or may not have succeeded in the task. It also allows students more chances to succeed into higher education, which is vital. (3043)*
>
> *It's not cheating (2035)*
>
> *Exams can go wrong for anyone and it would be a shame if a student misses out on a good uni if he/she had a bad exam. (4009)*

The views of the students interviewed were generally similar to the majority of the views expressed in the questionnaire survey: A levels were very important and the system was fair because everybody had a chance to improve if they wanted or needed to.

5.4.2 Views of the college managers and teachers

The question about fairness was also discussed with the teachers and college managers, all of whom talked about their experience of the 'terminal-exam' system when they took their A levels. They all thought the modular system was easier to handle academically. However, they liked its feature of having records of interim performance and they also saw the merits of resits in terms of providing a chance for students to rectify underperformance.

The college manager of the Independent College said his college wanted to make good use of the resit system in order to ease the examination pressure at the end of Year 13.

> *The general premise is we have a modular exam system, let's use that system, take the exam in January, do it as well as you can, hope that you don't have to take it again. If you fail your exams in January, resit it in June and then in January of Year 13, and so on. But what we don't want is building up a lot of pressure in the final sitting in June of the final year. (IND-College:11)*

The college managers and teachers of the other two colleges, on the other hand, had some reservation about the unlimited resit rule, as shown in the following comments.

It gets a bit frustrating when students resit two or three times. I think it's good for relieving some of the exam pressure but I find students do get too relaxed about exams. (FE-College:47)

I think it's helpful to be able to resit because a sudden-death approach to an exam may not give an accurate assessment of someone's ability. I don't approve of the current situation where you can resit many times. I don't think it's helpful to the students. (SF-College:38)

The modular system just seems to be really easy to me. Sometimes I really question whether it's actually testing their ability as such. In terms of education, I'm 50-50 about it. There's a lot of slack for them to keep resitting rather than just focusing all the way through the year, which they don't. (Psychology:100)

5.5 University admissions and the importance of resit opportunities

The vast majority of the students in the study wanted to go to university; this included 98 per cent of the students in the questionnaire survey and all the students interviewed.

5.5.1 Importance of A levels for university admissions

The students in the questionnaire survey rated very highly the importance of A-level results as a factor for gaining admissions to university (rated 4.6 on the 5-point scale).

The students interviewed generally wanted to go to university after sixth-form and they saw A level as the means to get them there.

I want to go to university. I believe in this day and era you have to go through university in order to get a substantial job and obviously you have to do A levels to get there. (Michelle:1:1)

Obviously the main thing is getting the A levels and then obviously getting into university, but that's mainly from A levels. (Liz:1:11)

The students did not seem to be deterred by the high tuition fees or economic downturn (this was before the move by government in 2010 to raise the cap of the tuition fees). For example, one student mentioned his worries about costs but said he still wanted to go to university and would apply to universities closer to home so as to cut down on living expenses. The majority of the students wanted to go to university for utilitarian reasons; they saw university education as a worthy investment for a profitable career

later in life (see Sutherland, 2008). Only two students mentioned further learning as an incentive.

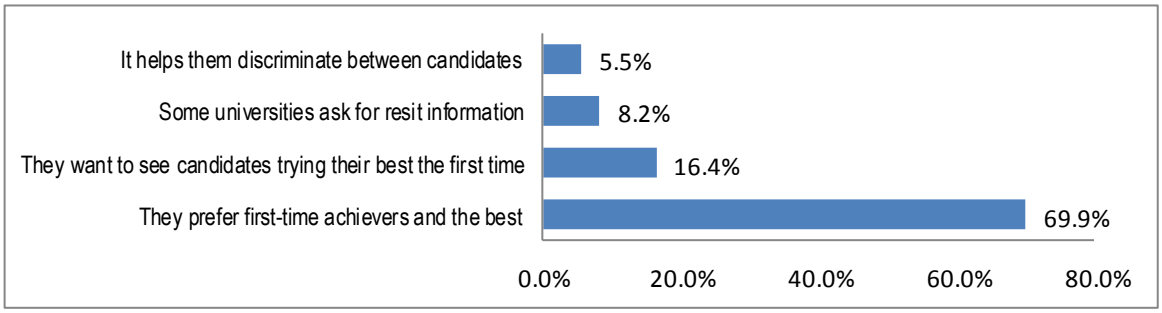
> *Well, not necessarily to go to university just to go to university. I want to go to university to study something I love doing. (Edward:1:4)*
>
> *I always want to expand what I do and learn, and so it seems like the obvious choice; so, I just want to go higher and higher up in education. (Helen:1:1)*

5.5.2 Students' views of whether universities care about resits in selections

60 per cent of the students in the questionnaire survey thought that universities do not care whether their candidates have resat during the A-level course. Fairly similar statistics were found among boys (63%) and girls (57%). The biggest difference was between the colleges. Three-quarters (74%) of the students from the Independent College thought that universities do not care, whereas in the case of both the Sixth-Form College and the FE College, the percentages of 'care' and 'not care' were about half and half. This outcome could be due to the resit culture in the Independent College, as indicated by its college manager's comment about making full use of the system described earlier.

The reasons given by the students were analyzed separately for those who thought universities care about resits (73 students; 40%) and others who thought they do not care (110 students; 60%); 84 students did not give a reason.

Figure 5.2: Students' reasons as to why universities care about resits



It is interesting to see the way some students interpreted how resitters may be viewed by universities, as shown in the following questionnaire responses:

They want the best people to make their uni look good, so resits look bad. (2006)

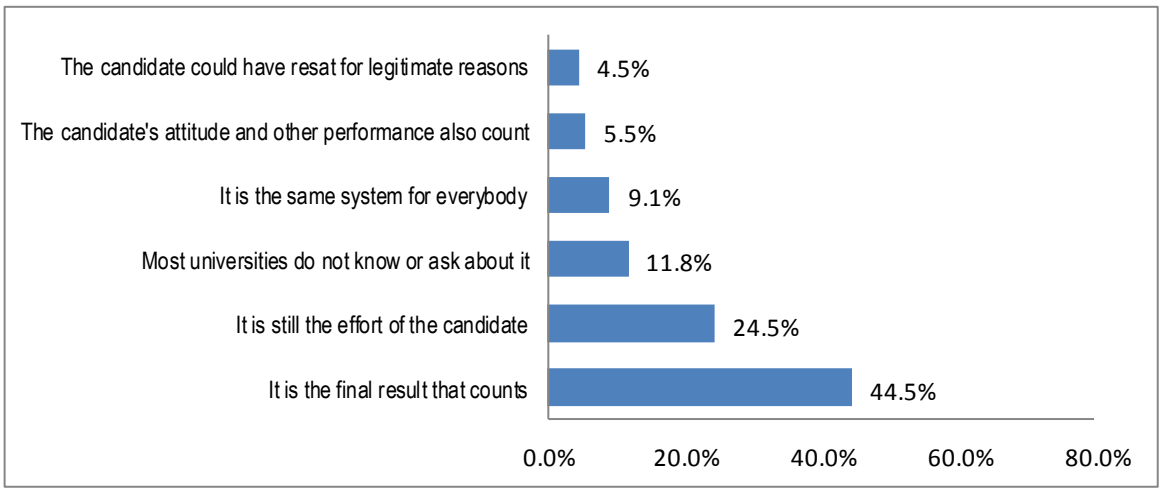
A student who hasn't taken resits might be more impressive. (2018)

Resit shows a possible lack of preparation or unreliability. (4015)

They are obviously less clever if they need another chance at A level. (3024)

As for the 60 per cent who thought universities do not care about resits, their reasons are summarized below:

Figure 5.3: Students' reasons as to why universities do not care about resits



Below are some of the students' responses on the questionnaire:

They are only interested in what the candidate is capable of, not how long it took to achieve it. (2023)

They get so many applicants; unless they are stuck between two candidates, they don't care (3050)

They know resits are common and all that info is rarely disclosed to them. (4088)

In summary, the students were mostly concerned about their A-level grades because they wanted to go to university and thought that good A-level results were what universities looked for. The majority of them thought that it generally did not matter to universities if they achieved their results through resits. This could be the reason why the students on the whole found it very easy to decide whether or not to resit, as discussed below.

5.6 The resit decision

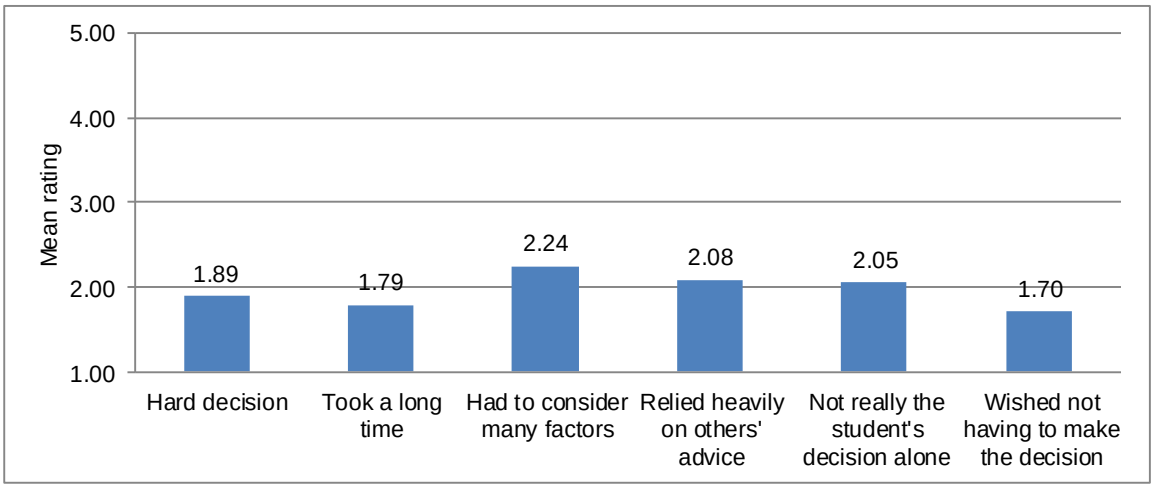
The students were asked about how they made resit decisions, both on the questionnaire and in the interviews.

5.6.1 Easiness of the decision

According to the questionnaire survey, over half of the students (53%) decided whether to resit or not immediately when they received their AS results at the end of Year 12. About 17 per cent decided during the summer and 30 per cent made their minds up at the start of Year 13.

In general, the students found the resit decision process very easy, as shown below:

Figure 5.4: Students' ratings of the difficulty of their resit decision
(Rating: 5 = extremely accurate; 1 = not at all accurate)



Both the resit-decision timing and difficulty-rating patterns were very similar for all three colleges and between boys and girls.

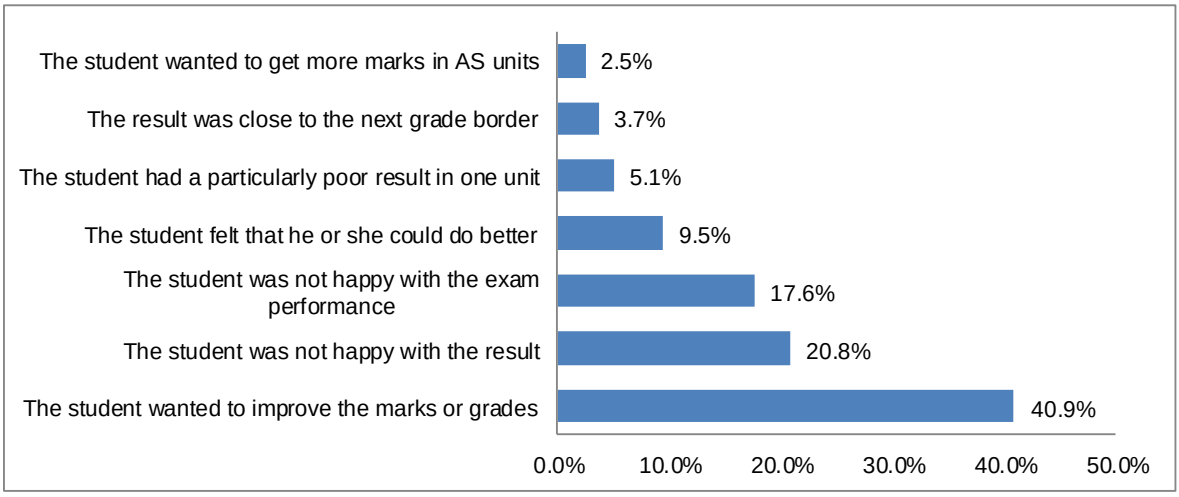
5.6.2 Reasons for resitting or not

The vast majority (88%) of the students in the questionnaire survey indicated that they were resitting, mostly in January and some in June.

The reasons given by the 33 students (12%) for not resitting were largely that they were satisfied with their grades or performance.

The reasons given by the students for resitting are summarized below:

Figure 5.5: Students' reasons for resitting



Close to 80 per cent of the reasons given was simply that the students were not happy with the result and wanted to improve it in another attempt; about 10 per cent thought they could do better, and the rest was more to do with strategies, such as resitting easier AS units or grade-borderline cases (more about resit strategies are discussed in Chapter 6).

The students interviewed made similar remarks about their reasons for resitting:

> *It wasn't a high A, and it's quite an easy module to do; might as well try to get as high a mark as you can because you don't have to revise for it that much. (Liz:1:16)*

> *I got really bad grades for all my History, so I'm just going to retake all of them. (Cathy:1:44)*

> *The grades weren't good enough and I felt that I didn't do myself justice by just getting a D, you know, just accepted that. I thought, no, I can do better. (Frank:3:4)*

5.6.3 Parental influence

The research findings suggest some influence by parents over the students' resit decisions but mostly in the form of showing support rather than giving advice. 65 per cent of the students in the questionnaire survey talked to their parents about whether or

not to resit. In general, the students interviewed were happy with the support from their parents, whom they said respected their choice and trusted their judgement.

> *They know that obviously I can judge whether I can do it, that's my own task, so…. I think they completely think it's my decision. (Liz:2:100)*
>
> *The teachers assumed that we all are going to get As. It was my parents and me who discussed whether or not I should resit all the things I haven't got As (Kenneth:1:17)*
>
> *They don't advise me. They just help me decide when I'm not sure and then I talk to them about it to see what they think. (George:2:59)*

The students said their parents were willing to pay for the resits as long as they were committed to working hard for the examination.

> *The money is definitely not a worry because like my parents would want me to do well, and they're like, we will pay the money for you to do it if you think you can do better. (Frank:3:5)*
>
> *As long as I'm willing to work hard then they're willing to pay. (Doris:1:97)*
>
> *Just getting the grades is so much more important than the cost really. I said I will just resit whichever one I got a B in and they just agreed with that. (Liz:1:38)*

5.6.4 Teachers' advice

87 per cent of the students in the questionnaire survey indicated that they had sought or received advice from their teachers on whether to resit or not. The students' ratings of the importance of the teachers' advice was above average, at 3.84 on the 5-point scale.

The students were asked to describe their teachers' advice on the questionnaire. 55 students (21%) did not write anything, including 44 students who were resitting and nine who were not. The large amount of missing data could be due to the open format which required some effort from the students, or it could also be that the students did not have much to write about.

For those not resitting, half of the advice given by their teachers was either that there was no need or that the student should consider the workload factor; the other half indicated that the teachers let them decide.

As for those resitting, about 60 per cent of the teachers' advice can be classified as constructive, with the teachers explaining the reason for their recommendation and factors which the students should consider before resitting. The other 40 per cent was much less helpful, with little or no advice, or simply leaving the students to decide for themselves.

Figure 5.6: Teachers' advice as described by the students who decided to resit

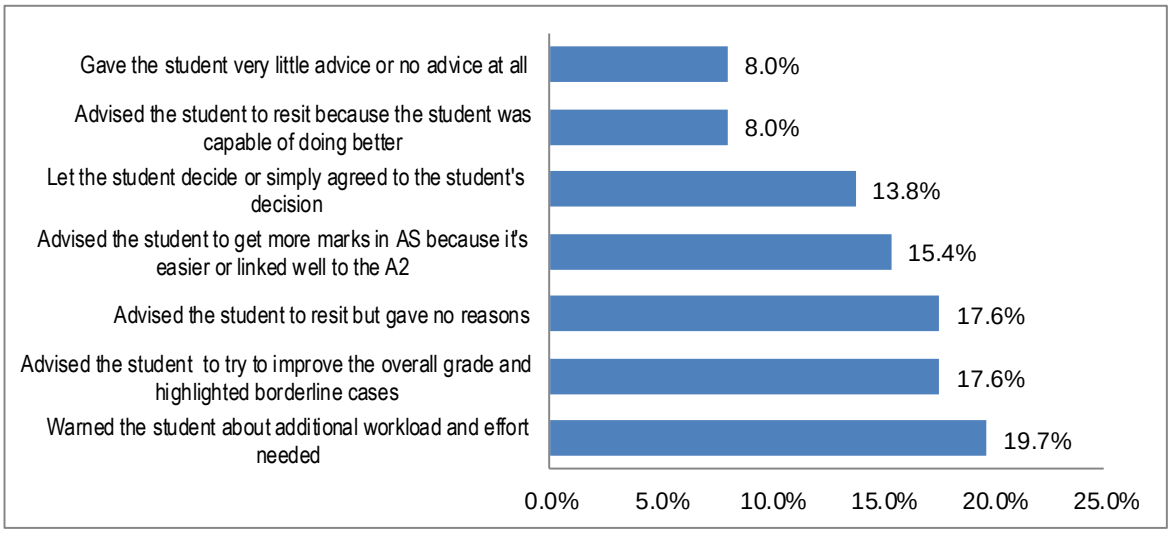


Table 5.3 below shows some examples of the teacher's advice as entered on the questionnaire by the students who decided to resit, grouped by the students' AS results before the resit. It seems that, in general, students who scored poorly in the examination received less constructive advice from their teachers than those who had good results (there were some exceptions, but these were rare). The same pattern was found among all three colleges but it should be noted that there were very few students with low AS results at the Independent College (only four grade Es among its students who took part in the questionnaire).

Table 5.3: Examples of students' reasons for resitting and the advice of their teachers

The student's reason for resitting	Teacher's advice as described by the student	Subject result	College	Student code
I did crap	Agreed with me	U	FE	3033
I got a U grade in the unit and want to improve it	The teacher said it was a brilliant idea	E	FE	3085
I didn't get a good enough grade	I didn't get any	E	SF	2032
I can do better	Weren't worst results	C	IND	4044
I want to do better	Not much	C	SF	2008
I think I can do better	They said I should as I can do better	C	FE	3048
To try and gain extra marks towards an A grade	To consider how close I was to the grade boundaries and the effect the extra work would have on current study	B	FE	3069
I did bad last term	Subject teachers illustrate to me the best outcome of my results.	B	IND	4105
To bring my mark up	It is easier to get AS marks than A2	B	FE	3077
I want to improve my grade	If I had enough time then resit	B	SF	2035
I got a B in one of the modules	Think about how you will do in A2	A	IND	4070
I think I can improve	Resit to get as many marks as possible	A	FE	3016
I want a higher UMS score	I should because a higher mark would look better on uni applications	A	SF	2022

When the question of sufficiency of teachers' advice was put to the students in the interview, a similar finding was found with the students at the Sixth-Form College. With the exception of Doris, who scored good AS grades (As and Bs) and was happy with the teachers' advice, the other three, who did less well in the ASs, were not satisfied with the advice given. The comments of Doris and those of Cathy who scored poorly in the AS examinations, are given below for comparison.

> *For Maths hopefully, I should get an A. They advised me about the different units in Maths and basically said if you think it will affect your overall mark then you should probably consider retaking. (Doris:1:45,46)*

> *Not much advice really. Like History, obviously I had to retake that but I didn't get much advice there, same with Law. It's just my English teacher who told me that I should resit because a C wouldn't count much towards my final grade. (Cathy:1:71)*

On the other hand, the situation was different for the students at the Independent College and the FE College, who all seemed generally happy with the advice they received, regardless of their AS performance, as shown in the comments of the following students.

> *I wanted an A and spoke to a few teachers about my resits. They generally told me to start revising as soon as you can; they don't think it was I didn't know the subject, it was more of the exam didn't go well. (Edward:1:35)*

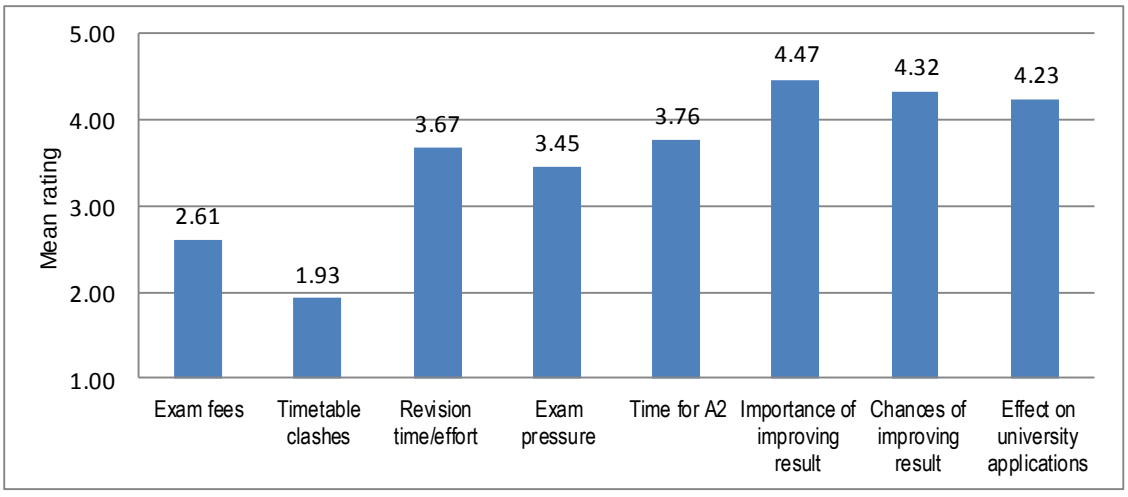
> *They tell you whether the grade is good enough or not good enough for you…. and if they think it's in your ability to do it, then do the resit. (Nicole:1:51,52)*

5.6.5 Factors in resit decision

The students were asked to rate a list of eight factors on the questionnaire in terms of importance in their resit decision. The results are shown below.

Figure 5.7: Students' ratings of different factors in their resit decision

(Rating: 5 = extremely influential; 1 = not at all influential)



Timetable-clash and exam-fees had the lowest ratings (both below 3 on the 5-point scale). It should be noted that the ratings were given only by those who had considered the specific factors in their decision. Only 50 per cent of the students considered the factor of timetable-clash (64 per cent for the exam-fees factor), whereas all the other factors were considered by over 80 per cent of the students.

The most important factors (all rated above 4 on the 5-point scale) were the importance of improvement, the chances of improvement and the effect on university applications. These three factors took precedence over other concerns the students might have, including revision time/effort, exam pressure and time needed for A2.

The findings were generally supported by the students in the interview, who reiterated frequently the importance of improving their A-level results in order to succeed in their university applications. They also indicated that they were happy to pay the resit fees themselves (many of them took part-time jobs) or skip lessons to resit an examination.

5.7 Students' performance in resits

The modular system and its resit arrangements make it possible for students to know their interim performance in A levels and to try to improve it. Obviously, under the 'no penalty' rule, the students' results could only get better or stay the same. According to the QCA (2007a) review, the mean change in UMS (uniform mark scale) marks in the second attempt was between 15-25 marks higher than the first attempt.

Although reluctant to show me their resit statistics, the college manager of the Independent College told me that their records showed a significant improvement in their students' resits.

> *What we do know is that resits significantly improve AS marks and they bump up the final A level marks, so most people improve at some point on their resits at this college, so we think they're a good thing. (IND-College:15)*

Ten out of the fourteen students interviewed improved their results in the resit. Of the four who did not, two (Aaron and Cathy) had poor AS results and both were from the Sixth-Form College. They found the experience of sitting and resitting examinations daunting; Cathy left her college in March and Aaron got the same grades in the resit, a C and a D, with lower marks. The other two students who did worse in the resit both had good AS grades, an A and a B respectively, and both scored a C in the resit; Michelle from the Independent College attributed the worse performance to wrong choice of question and Helen from the FE College put it down to poor examination technique. Both students, as well as Aaron, are featured in the case studies in Chapter 8.

Of those who did better in the resit, half improved significantly, between 1-2 grades higher while the other half got better marks within the grade. There was, of course, always a possibility that the students' performance in the A2 examinations in January was affected by the resits, as indicated by the comment of the student below:

> *I think the resit affected my A2 exam, that I only got a D in that…. If I had to do just the A2 exam, I would probably have got a better mark. (Brian:3:82)*

Nevertheless, the students in the interview, including the one quoted above, all thought that their decision to resit was right. To them, resits represented an opportunity to improve and, regardless of the outcome, it was still a chance too good to miss.

5.8 Factors contributing to the students' improvement in resits

While the QCA review shows some statistical evidence that students were able to improve their A-level results through resits, it gives very little information on how the students improved. Through talking to the students in the interview about their resit experience, some factors became prominent in explaining the resit improvement. They are:

- Underperforming in the first examination
- Experience learned from the first examination
- Better understanding of the subject through revision
- Maturity in subject knowledge
- Better skills and technique through practice
- Clearer goals and greater motivation

5.8.1 Underperforming in the first examination

The reason why some students in the interview underperformed in their first examination was either because they had underestimated the work required in A levels, knowing that they could always resit, or because they were not ready for the examination.

5.8.1.1 Underestimating the demands of A levels

Many of the students interviewed admitted to underestimating the demands of A levels when they started sixth-form. Similar findings are found in the research of Hodgson and Spours (2005). Compared to the nine or ten subjects in GCSE, many of which were compulsory, the fewer number of subjects had made the workload seem lighter. The fact that the students largely chose subjects they were good at or interested in also meant that they found the learning easier, at least they thought so initially. The new learning environment in sixth-form could also be a factor why some students adopted a lax attitude (more about this will be discussed in Chapter 6). On the one hand, the students were given more freedom and independence but on the other, they were also made more responsible for their own study and revision. Some students had wrongly assumed that, since they had sailed through GCSEs effortlessly, it would not be that much different for A levels.

> *You don't think it seriously until the university thing actually pops up. It's just like another GCSE exam, I mean, in GCSE you don't really work that hard. (Doris:1:58)*

> *When I came here, I was quite arrogant, a bit cocky with my knowledge. I did quite well with my GCSEs, so when I came, I did not understand how hard the work was going to be, and what quite a big step up it is. (Edward:3:46)*

> *I was six months into college and was still getting used to it. I didn't really do much work. (Frank:1:7)*

A few of the students admitted to 'taking a break' when they started sixth-form. Knowing that they could resit also explained to a certain extent the lack of urgency in some students in terms of the need to work hard from the outset.

> *Last year I had a sort of attitude where I thought I still had like one year to resit all the modules. I didn't really try as hard as I should. (Kenneth:1:27)*

> *Everyone realizes that you can just retake and retake; they don't wholeheartedly work so hard in their first year because it doesn't matter that much. (Michelle:1:25)*

5.8.1.2 Not ready for the examination

Another reason for students underperforming in the examination could be that they were entered for it early, in January instead of June. Not all students were ready for these 'early examinations', as shown by the comment of the following student:

> *Last year, the first exam in January, I completely had no idea of what's going on because we had only been learning it for a term and it was a huge period. Anyway, I did the exam, knowing that I wasn't going to get a good mark. (Michelle:3:62)*

In other words, the students' poor performance in the first attempt could simply be because they had not learned the subject unit properly. More about early examinations and their implications for student learning will be discussed in Chapter 6.

5.8.2 Experience learned from the first examination

The experience of the first examination helped some students improve in the resit by understanding better the examination requirements, having the benefit of examination feedback and having less examination pressure the second time round.

5.8.2.1 Better understanding of the examination requirements

The students interviewed talked about how the first examination's experience had given them a better understanding of what to expect in the examination. For instance, if they had run out of time or had difficulties understanding the structure of the question paper, they were better prepared the second time round. One might assume that the students would have learned sufficiently about the examination requirements from mocks or doing past papers. It seemed, however, that past papers were rarely used as a timed examination-simulation exercise; they were used more for practice in answering particular question types or revision for specific subject areas. The students also did not seem to take mocks seriously either.

> *The experience of how long the exam is going to be, what actually happens on the day and doing it like under pressure rather than sitting at home doing a past paper or doing a mock; you're not going to get the same experience from it. (George:1:59)*

> *Mock exams are never really like the real thing because everyone is sort of not taking it seriously…. whereas exams are really pressurized. (Kenneth:2:20)*

We don't really do any practice papers, well we did but it was kind of like revision and not like a proper exam. You just do like a question at a time; it's not really like under exam conditions. (Cathy:1:91)

5.8.2.2 Feedback on the first examination's performance

The examination experience also helped some students when they went over their performance with their teachers afterwards. Some went further by asking for their papers back and were then able to identify the areas where they scored poorly.

Obviously when you come out of it, you can find out how the exam boards want you to answer the questions by talking to teachers.... I also got my paper back and that remark showed me the areas where I need to improve on. (Edward:3:16)

One works really fast with Maths, so, make tiny slips and lose little marks, it can take you from an A to a B, and that's what happened in M2. I've got the paper back and I just made a teeny, weeny mistake in each question. (Doris:3:35)

Again, one might assume that the students would have got useful feedback from their teachers in mocks or classroom exercises but, as mentioned earlier, the live examination experience meant much more to the students and had their fuller attention.

5.8.2.3 Examination pressure

Stress obviously can affect one's performance in examinations. Knowing that they could keep the first result helped ease the pressure in resits for some students, particularly those who felt that they had not performed their best previously or who had already got a satisfactory grade.

In Business, I did quite bad, I got a C but I knew that it was a C without revising, so I knew I can easily improve in the resit; so, no great pressure. (Jack:1:52)

Because I have already got a decent grade, there was a little bit of pressure to get a better grade but it wasn't a lot really. (Brian:2:27)

On the other hand, resits could also mean a last opportunity for getting the desired grade, hence, more pressure. Students with poor results might also lack the confidence going into the same examination again. Some students said the pressure they faced in the resit was more than the first time.

It's kind of more pressure cos you think if I fail to get it the second time it may be worse. I don't know, yeah, it's hard. (George:2:17)

I guess it was kind of failing again, they were the worries. (Aaron:3:29)

I think there was more pressure, but maybe in a good way because I want to do better than I did in the previous AS. (Kenneth:2:28)

5.8.3 Better understanding of the subject through revision

Obviously, one reason why some students managed to improve in the resit was because they did their revision and became more knowledgeable about the subject. In general, the students said they revised for the resit largely on their own; many of them found it fairly easy to revise because they had their previous revision notes to hand. According to Dann (2002), through revisiting concepts, skills and ideas, the process of revision before an examination can aid consolidation and encourage different and new connections to be made between aspects of learning. By going over the notes again, some of the students said they came to a better understanding of the subject, as shown in the comment of the following student who improved in his resit of AS Chemistry (a subject he had dropped in Year 13; i.e. the improvement was not due to continuing into A2, as will be discussed next):

When I did my resit, everything kind of clicked and came together…. It's generally the understanding that's the main thing. During the resit, I actually finally understood it in revision and I knew how to answer the questions. (Edward:3:19)

5.8.4 Maturity in subject knowledge

McClune (2001) did a study comparing the performance of lower-sixth and upper-sixth students in linear and modular A level physics examination. His research suggests that students could benefit from delaying or taking the examination at a later part of the course. Similar findings were found in this research in that one of the reasons why some students improved in the resits could be maturity in the subject when they continued studying it in Year 13.

When the students learned their first units in Year 12, they might not have fully understood or appreciated the subject. As they continued to mature intellectually in Year 13, some had come to a better understanding of the earlier units. Using the subject of French as an example, the QCA review calls this the 'maturation benefit'; i.e. where

students' general understanding and ability in the language improve over time. Similar comments were made by the teachers and college managers, as follows:

> *In Psychology, it's a subject where some of them get it instantly and some of them will take a year and then they still don't get it; so some of them do better in the resits because they just suddenly get it. (Psychology:104)*
>
> *The only way to succeed in Maths is to practise a lot; just by that extra amount of time continuing to study Maths, they could then naturally do better. (Maths:101)*
>
> *When we come to Year 13, a few are resitting the AS, they find it pretty straight-forward because they've become better students of that subject and they look back at what is basically easier material and they perform better. (IND-College:44)*

This 'maturation benefit' was also evident in the students' own description of their resit experience. The students talked about having a better grasp of the subject knowledge in Year 13 as they learned the subject at a more difficult level, synoptically or from a different perspective in the A2 units.

> *Physics are really related, the A2 modules are quite difficult and complicated compared to the AS. So after I studied the A2, I do understand more about the AS. (Peter:2:54)*
>
> *Especially when you're taking A2 because the papers are really synoptical. You're more knowledgeable in the subject; what I knew studying in lower six, I know a lot more now. (Nicole:2:23)*
>
> *The History A2 unit is an extension of last year's module, so you're studying the same thing but from a different perspective. In a sense, it does help because you're reminded all of that, the people, the plans and what happened. (Helen:1:88)*

There were some exceptions, however. Two students who did not score well in the ASs in Year 12 said that they found revising for the AS resits while learning the A2 a bit confusing and it was therefore harder for them.

> *If anything, it's sort of a hindrance, because you kind of forget things and then I have to re-learn everything, so it's a bit of more in the way. I have to learn two things at once, going to lessons and trying to revise a little bit for the resit. (Aaron:2:48)*
>
> *In the AS year we had the information fresh on our minds but now it's the resit, I'll have to revise all the stuff I did a year ago, which make it harder in a way because I've got all the new information as well for the current modules. (Kenneth:1:45)*

5.8.5 Better skills and technique

5.8.5.1 Improvement in generic skills

Apart from subject knowledge, generic skills, such as essay-writing, case-study evaluation, problem solving and analytical skills, are all important in answering questions at A levels. According to the students interviewed, these skills were further taught and practised in Year 13 and they were able to apply them better in the resit.

> *We've done practice essay and the A2 essays are longer than the AS, so that you end up writing more anyway. That was helpful. (Liz:2:40)*

> *My teachers used to say, you need to organize yourself better, but then I didn't know how they meant, but now we do essay plans in our lesson, so now, I find it easier in the resit. That's the concept I didn't know before. (Nicole:3:30)*

5.8.5.2 Better examination technique

Examination skills, such as time management, reading and understanding question requirements, planning and structuring the answers, are also important in taking timed public examinations like A levels. Some of the students said that better examination technique was the main reason for their improvement in the resit.

> *In Psychology, you've only got 30 minutes to write like 24 or 18-mark essays and that's quite a lot of pressure. I learn now you have to get the points down, make sure that you get the mark and move on. (Kenneth:2:17)*

> *Sometimes if you know all the knowledge stuff but you don't know how to use the technique to answer the questions then you'll just get some low marks. (Peter:1:56)*

The teachers and college managers generally agreed that maturity in skills and technique contributed significantly to the students' confidence and subsequently, improvement in the resit, as shown by the comment of the Mathematics teacher below:

> *They just find that practising C1 and C2 papers in their second year is very easy for them. And it does build their confidence; students do tend to do an awful lot better when they resit. (Maths:66)*

5.8.6 Clearer goals and greater motivation

When the students started Year 13, it suddenly dawned on many of them that half of their sixth-form years had gone. Some also found that they were not on track with their target or expected grades. Resits thus represented their last chance.

> *January, that was the second last chance I would have. It's near the end, I've got the AS grades that I have and I know what I need to get the As or Bs overall, whereas in AS you were doing your modules for the first time, you didn't really know. (Kenneth:2:57)*

> *I didn't put that much pressure on myself last year. The whole university thing hasn't really kicked in. I was aware of the university boundary grades but I just wasn't that bothered about it until I actually got my results in August. (Doris:1:42)*

By January in Year 13, all the students interviewed had received some conditional offers from universities or at least knew the general entry requirements for the university courses they applied for. They said that knowing the grade requirements had made them more focused, and they worked much harder towards the grade targets.

> *I just needed to get an overall B to get into the university I wanted, really. C wasn't good enough. I just needed to bring them up a grade in the resit. (George:3:6)*

> *Last year I thought I got another two years but suddenly over the past few months something kind of hit me. I was doing all these applications and think I really wasn't ready for university. I have to pick up the pace for these last months. (Edward:2:51)*

> *I was quite confident last year in all the things so didn't bother doing much, but now I went to universities to see where I wanted to go, and work for it. I didn't really have the motivation last year. (Jack:2:21)*

According to Pintrich (1989), task value is an important component of student motivation. It refers to the students' perception of the importance of the task, the students' interest in the task and the utility value of the task for future goals. The students' future goal was to go to university and A levels were perceived by them as the immediate task at hand in order to achieve that goal, with some trying to improve their results through resits.

5.9 Summary

The questionnaire findings suggest a much higher proportion of students resitting (over 80 per cent) in the three colleges than the one-third reported in the 2007 QCA review. Most of the students learned about resits from their teachers, usually after the first examination in Year 12. There were variations in how teachers advised individual students; students with poor AS results seemed to receive less support or advice, and the situation was worse at the Sixth-Form College than at the other two colleges. The majority of the students thought that the resit system was fair in terms of giving students a second chance. They resat because they saw it as an opportunity to improve their A-level results, which they perceived as the main criteria for university admissions, and this took precedence over other concerns the students might have, such as revision time or the effect on A2. By identifying some of the factors which contributed to the students' improvement in resits, the research study has provided some evidence that improvement in A levels through resits is not due solely to students getting better at taking examinations but is commensurate with better standards in terms of subject knowledge and skills. Whether the improvement implies that the students have become better learners, however, needs to be further investigated. The next chapter looks at how the students made use of resits and how that affected their approach to learning during sixth-form education.

6 How students make use of resits in sixth-form education

6.1 Introduction

Public examinations have their limitations because they measure the performance of students in a sample of a defined syllabus at a specified duration of time under controlled conditions (Madaus, Russell and Higgins, 2009). Resits provide a mechanism to rectify situations where the students underperform under exceptional circumstances (e.g. illness, tragedy in the family). However, once resits become a standard feature of the system and, particularly without a cap on them, the original purpose could be buried under the second-chance mentality and strategy of 'playing to the system' as students try to make full use of resits in order to get the best possible A-level results. This chapter examines some of these practices and their impact on student learning.

6.2 Starting sixth-form: great expectations

According to the students interviewed, they generally started sixth-form with high hopes and excitement, from the pride of continuing into post-16 education to experiencing a new learning environment, having the satisfaction of choosing their subjects, being given more freedom and responsibility and looking forward to going to university afterwards.

6.2.1 Greater independence

All the students interviewed talked about how much they enjoyed the different learning environment in sixth-form, including the independence of organizing their own activities both inside and outside the classroom, such as researching information for their subject and organizing student activities.

> *The first three, four months in college, I was like, oh yeah, all fun, that's great. Rugby, beer.. I can plan like the night I can go out or study when there's an important lesson. It's kind of a challenge, isn't it? Responsibility, I suppose. (Frank:2:32)*

The students also noticed a change in their relationship with the teachers, from being fairly formal in GCSE to a much friendlier one.

> *I am enjoying it a lot more than when I was in GCSE because GCSE was very time-tabled, very scheduled. Generally I try to have a friendly relationship with my teachers and I dislike being dictated to. (Edward:1:7)*

6.2.2 Freedom to choose their own subjects

One of the most welcoming change for the students was the ability to choose their own subjects. Under *Curriculum 2000*, students are encouraged to take up a broad range of subjects at AS level before specializing in some of them at A2. It has been suggested that the increased variety of subjects in A levels was an attempt by government to widen post-16 participation through the introduction of some less traditional subjects, such as Media Studies and Dance, which have seen big increases in recent years (ACS, 2009; de Waal, 2009). Without going into a debate about whether these so called 'soft' subjects lack the academic rigour (de Waal and Cowen, 2007b; Economist, 2009), the variety of subjects had certainly helped some of the students choose subjects that interested them rather than routinely taking up the traditional ones. All three colleges ran briefing sessions and 'trial classes' at the start of Year 12; that seemed to work well and students were able to drop the AS subjects they were not comfortable with at the end of Year 12. The students interviewed generally seemed happy with their subjects, which they chose largely on the basis of three factors: interest, perceived ability and university choices.

> *In GCSE you're forced to do a language, Maths, sciences and stuff but as soon as you carry on, you can choose your four subjects. Yes, it's more work but it's more interesting because you're doing subjects that you actually want to be doing. (Kenneth:1:3)*

> *I chose English because I was quite good at English at GCSE and I enjoyed that; same with History. Politics, I was really interested in it anyway. I chose Law as well but I ended up dropping that this year, just didn't seem interested and I picked up Sociology because it ties in with Politics a bit. (Brian:1:12)*

> *PE, well, I'm really quite sporty. Communications sounds like really interesting, like body language and learning about how you communicate. Economics, I'm quite good at numbers and money and stuff, it's about how the world goes round, I suppose, isn't it? (Frank:1:53)*

> *I want to study Accounting and Finance in university so the most appropriate subjects are Economics and Maths. (Peter:2:39)*

The three factors of interest, academic ability and university were also highlighted by the teachers interviewed when asked why they thought their students chose the subject they taught.

> *The majority of students choose Maths because they have an interest, but there is also a significant proportion who had experienced success in GCSE, they would choose Maths as a third or fourth option for AS. There is an expectation that if you can do Maths, you should. (Maths:12)*

> *I think they choose based on their university choices and obviously some of them pick PE because they are sportsmen and they don't know what else to do so they take it at A levels, and it will be one of their stronger subjects in GCSE. (PE:9)*

> *Interest. Yes, totally. They think it's all going to be mind-reading in Psychology and which is why the Welcome Day is so important. We have to go, no, it's not that, it's actually quite difficult, so at first, they all join out of interest. (Psychology:11)*

According to Weeden, Winter and Broadfoot (2002), with subjects of their own choice and clearer learning goals, post-16 students tend to take more responsibility for their learning. This was noticeable in some of the students' comments in terms of the difference in learning between A levels and GCSE.

> *GCSE is just-- some people didn't really care, but everyone at college doing their A levels care about it because they don't have to be here, so, they obviously want to get good results. (Brian:1:96)*

> *It's a lot harder and more work.. and it's good because the students don't muck around in lessons whereas in GCSE, it's much less focused on work (George:1:3)*

> *In class they teach us like most of the knowledge but there's a lot of additional reading we have to see for ourselves to get the extra information…. In GCSE I think teachers are mostly like talked for an hour. (Cathy:2:89,106)*

Subsequent to the widening of access to higher education in England in recent decades, there are now plenty of choices of universities and first-degree courses in England (Lambert and Lines, 2000). The students interviewed chose a wide range of courses in their university applications, from Mathematics to Psychology, Music, Politics, Accounting and Finance, Law and Media Studies. Their favourite universities were those with a good reputation and a friendly social environment.

6.2.3 A short 'honeymoon' period

In summary, the students started sixth-form full of confidence from their recent success in GCSE and enjoyed the independence in the new learning environment. However, that period of freedom and enthusiasm did not seem to last long. After the initial excitement, realities soon hit in the form of minimum expected grades and early examinations in January, four months after the start of sixth-form. The rest of sixth-form was then dedicated to sitting and resitting examinations in order to meet the grade targets and goal of examination success. Instead of focusing on learning, a lot of time was spent on examination planning, resit strategies and revision tactics.

6.3 Minimum expected grades

6.3.1 Predictions of students' A-level results

In general, students are given an assessment of their academic potential in terms of A-level grades at the start of sixth-form[16]. Minimum expected grades are generally predicted on the basis of the students' GCSE results, but can be revised in accordance with their other examination performance as they progress through the course. They work primarily by comparing the performance of individual students to that of the rest of the regional or national cohort in the GCSE-AS-A2 progression. As observed by the college managers and teachers interviewed, the predictions are fairly mechanical and tend to under-estimate because of the focus on the minimum target.

> *It's the ALIS system we use. It tends to predict a little light on what the majority of students then later achieve…. There is that natural progression of difficulty in Maths but it's not always a good predictor. (Maths:46,47)*

> *We have minimum expected grades, but they're kind of a vague thing to go on…. I know a lot of people have disagreement about whether it's good, but I think you have to have something to go on and that's the only thing we've got. (Psychology:42,43)*

> *Most departments are now very good at tracking students against the minimum expected, but that's the minimum, it's not aspirational grades. (SF-College:28)*

[16] The more popular application packages include ALIS (http://www.bridgewaterhigh.com) and Alps (http://www.alps-va.co.uk).

6.3.2 Advantages and disadvantages of minimum expected grades

The use of minimum expected grades has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that it provides a clear common goal for both students and teachers. As commented by the teacher below, not all students knew what they wanted or were capable of, and the minimum expected grades gave them a rough idea of where they stood.

> *You get people who know since they're like five and then you get a group that have no idea, and that's difficult because you don't know what they need, what they want. But they've always got a rough idea of the minimum grades even if they're not sure. (Psychology:73)*

The students interviewed said that the minimum expected grades gave them a goal to strive for, particularly if they performed lower than predicted.

> *They predicted me high grades, so, when I got a low grade in an AS last year, I felt a bit disappointed in myself; there is always that if someone else has this idea of you, you can get it, why can't you? (Edward:1:53)*

On the other hand, the minimum-grade targets may 'pigeonhole' the students right from the start by judging them largely on past performance rather than their potential. Complacency may prevail for students with good GCSE grades or those with low confidence of their potential. Only one student in the interview (Kenneth) mentioned having his minimum expected grades upgraded at the end of Year 12 and it was the result of a lot of hard work and encouragement from his teachers and parents. Other students seemed to accept whatever grades they were predicted and these then formed their sixth-form goals, as shown in the following comments.

> *When we joined, we got our GCSE results taken into, like calculated, and came up with our predicted grades, I got a C for everything, and I'm pretty happy with that. (Frank:1:9)*

> *It's a prediction. If I put in the same amount of work that I did, maybe a bit more than I did last year, it should come up with the same results. I'm happy with that. (Brian:1:43)*

The minimum expected grades could also be used by a school or college to separate students into different groups according to their academic performance, as was the practice of the Independent College, as follows:

> *If, by correcting the timetable we're able to do some setting, then we might initially set our Year 12s through GCSE performance. Let's say you've got two Chemistry, we could break them into those who got A* and those who didn't. (IND-College:34)*

Weeden, Winter and Broadfoot (2002) suggest that when a school or college differentiates its students for organisational purposes or as a result of assessment, this affects social relations within the student culture, with the result that the stronger students will try harder while the weaker ones become more dispirited and may become more deviant. They point out that "such divisive processes are particularly likely to emerge as assessment processes become more overt and high-stakes" (ibid., p.52).

6.3.3 The role of minimum expected grades in sixth-form education

Regardless of whatever inadequacy they may have, the minimum expected grades play a very important role in sixth-form education. The students interviewed largely chose university courses based on them.

> *My top choice is 4 As and that's what I hope to get in the end. I'm so grade focused because you have to be. (Helen:1:69)*

> *I'm expected to get As. I want to do Finance and Accounting in university. The general requirement for this course is AAB, so I just want to get higher As in AS in order to secure this requirement. (Peter:1:49)*

> *I'm applying for Psychology and Philosophy, a joint degree. In lots of universities, you need an AAB or AAA. So, these 3As predicted really help me because I can get the offers from the universities. (Kenneth:1:15)*

The college managers and teachers said that throughout the sixth-form course, they used minimum expected grades to keep track of their students' performance. Typically, if they were fallen short, the students would be advised to resit.

> *If students underperform, less than their minimum expected grades, there would be a discussion or dialogue about resits. (SF-College:28)*

> *We've got the target minimum grade of the student to guide us, what they should be achieving; if it's below that, yes, take a resit. (FE-College:53)*

In general, the minimum expected grades are used by schools and colleges to provide the academic reference in support of their students' UCAS (Universities & Colleges

Admissions Service) applications for university admissions. It should, however, be pointed out that the predicted grades provided on the UCAS forms may not always be the same as the grades given by the schools or colleges to their students. Research by Snell et al. (2008) shows that students do not necessarily know what predicted grades have been put on their UCAS forms. More about predicated grades and how university admissions tutors view them will be discussed in Chapter 7.

By the time I saw them at the second interview in February 2009, the students had all received most, if not all, of the results of their UCAS applications. Some were disappointed by rejection from their top choices but all managed to get offers. The conditions of the offers ranged from Bs and Cs to 3As. Once an offer was made and accepted, the students then concentrated their effort on getting the A-level results stipulated in the conditions and sometimes this could influence their decision as to whether to resit more units in June.

> *I got BBC for a university I like …. When you get your grades back in March, the teachers will tell you whether to take the exam again or leave it. (Nicole:2:20,50)*

In summary, the minimum expected grades play an important role in student learning during sixth-form education. They represent a goal for the students to aim for and can influence their resit decisions. Some students might become complacent, however, sitting (and resitting, if necessary) examinations only to meet the minimum target.

6.4 Taking examinations early

6.4.1 The 'early examination' practice in the three colleges

As mentioned in Chapter 5, one reason why some students underperformed in the first examination was because they took the units early, in January instead of June. I asked the college managers about this practice.

The Independent College had an 'early examination' policy for all their subjects. Its main argument according to the college manager, whose comments are given below, was that early examinations gave students some experience of the examination and more chances to resit.

> *The student took GCSE for 8, 9, 10 subjects. So, they have become quite professional as exam takers and now, what we are asking them to take is one unit per subject so they're probably taking only four exams…. We do it in January so those who want or need another go will have the opportunity to improve. For some people, January is a little early and they learn from experience, what's to expect. (IND-College:8,9,10)*

As for the other two colleges, the practice varied from subject to subject, with some supporting early examinations for more resit opportunities while others believing that students should not be entered prematurely for examinations.

> *Some subjects actually believe in entering students almost as a mock. Some teachers feel that it's really important that students get that whole examination experience and then have a chance to re-do it. Other subjects feel that's wrong; they should only enter students when they're ready and that it can have a detrimental effect on the students' morale to take an exam early and do less well than they're capable of. So we don't have a strict policy because there are lots of views and I don't think we can come to one agreement. It's left to heads of department. (SF-College:16)*

> *Some of them have their AS in January, Physics, Chemistry and so on. Maths, they don't, English, I'm not sure. It depends on the subject. It's very soon for a lot of students but I quite like the fact that you've got one of the exams out of the way so there's less to do in June…. But it does seem very close to the beginning of the course, doesn't it? There isn't much time for teaching, is there? (FE-College:6,12)*

According to the QCA (2007a, para.15) report, "Centres often said that they used the January examinations as useful confidence and motivation-building sessions. There was no suggestion that early sessions were treated as 'mocks'.". I asked the teachers about their views on early examinations. The Mathematics teacher was not in favour of them.

> *We prefer our students to sit their exams at the end of academic year, so in June. I know that other departments and other colleges sometimes take them in January. But professionally we feel that students would not succeed as well had they only a few months' experience of the Maths education. (Maths:14)*

The PE teacher had no choice because it was his college's policy but said he did not like the rushed teaching in early examinations.

> *I don't like those early exams. I think it's disruptive to teaching a bit. It doesn't allow formal and good understanding. It's bit of a taste of it in the study to know how to do the exam…. I don't like it but the positive side I guess is that they have the exam experience. (PE:32,33)*

The Psychology teacher pointed out that, sometimes, when changes were made to the examination syllabus or specifications, students might be entered early in order for both teachers and students to get used to the new examination format.

> *We're not using it as a mock but I can see why some do because it's like if they don't do as well, then they can resit it. I'm not an advocate of January exams but particularly this year, it's a new spec, it was kind of like we have to put them in for January because we don't know whether we're doing it properly so I suppose it's also testing our teaching. (Psychology:22)*

6.4.2 Advantages and disadvantages of 'early examinations'

Examinations were taken early largely for three reasons: the experience, more chances to resit and more time to spend on the later, more difficult modules. In the interview, I asked the students about their experience with early examinations; most thought the teaching was rushed.

> *It wasn't so much that we weren't prepared, it was just the fact that we rushed through it. We covered everything but not in very much detail or understand it properly. (Kenneth:3:22)*

> *History, we rushed to do them in January so we got a second chance. Some people here got 2As, so now they're done, some people retaking both just like a need to bump up everything. (Michelle:3:64)*

All of the teachers interviewed agreed that the short duration of teaching in early examinations did not allow the students, particularly those who were unlikely to do well in the examination, sufficient time to appreciate or understand the subject properly. As commented by the college manager of the Sixth-Form College earlier, the practice may have a negative effect on students' morale. When asked about this, the college manager of the Independent College said it was not a major issue for their students and defended their practice, as follows:

> *When we started this policy, the only department that flagged a concern was the Maths department; they're saying their bottom groups simply won't have covered the material well enough and they were worried ((about morale)) but we went through with it. Actually they didn't do badly like they thought they might and the kids learned from the experience. Some perform disappointingly and they take it as a lesson, as an eye opener really, in how to prepare, what they need to do properly next time round. (IND-College:10)*

The findings of the student interviews suggest that, while some students might be able to rationalize their underperformance in the early examinations, others became somewhat dispirited with the low grades and found it hard to cope in fear of failing again in the resit. Below are the comments of some of the students (from different colleges) about their experience.

> *In January last year, I got a B and a C, it's sort of like oh, why did I get a B and a C, I'm sure I put effort in….but now I've done the resits, I realized that I just didn't know enough when I sat it then. (Nicole:3:44,48)*

> *You're still kind of discovering the college and friends, what's it all about in the first four months. I think it's too early to attempt an exam anyway. I didn't really learn much then and didn't know why and was a bit confused. (Frank:2:36)*

> *It put you off a little bit because I didn't understand much the first time and got quite low grades and a bit upset. So when you go into the exam again you think you can't do any worse. (Cathy:2:33)*

6.5 The examination culture in sixth-form education

6.5.1 The examination-driven nature of sixth-form

One drawback of the modular approach is that the two years of sixth-form could become very examination-driven. However, most students thought that the modular approach made learning easier and they liked the advantage of resit opportunities.

> *Yes, it's very exam-driven, especially when things become more and more modular. I mean modular is definitely easier because if you study a module for a term and have the exam at the end of it, it's going to be more fresh in your mind. (Helen:1:95)*

> *It'd be so hard if you have all the exams at end of Year 13. There'll be so much work to do; you'll have so many exams. It's not the same as GCSEs because in GCSE, one paper is like 45 minutes whereas A levels, an hour and a half. It will be impossible. (Michelle:3:32)*

> *I think it will be a bit harder if you have all exams at the end of the year, and unless you want to do an extra year in college, you wouldn't have a chance of retaking again. (Brian:3:66)*

The students interviewed said that throughout the two years, examinations were constantly on their mind but, in general, they did not seem to worry about it much because taking examinations 'made them more focused'.

> *I think it helps actually being exam-driven because you always bear in mind that there's a purpose to it and then you're always sort of aiming towards that. For me, the whole thing is to just get the A-level grades rather than anything else. (Liz:1:78)*
>
> *It kind of pushes you more although sometimes it's not a good thing because you can't think of anything but exams. (Cathy:1:112)*

Another reason why the high volume of examinations was acceptable to the students was because it was the same system for everybody and they all needed to focus on examinations to get good grades, as shown in the following student's comment:

> *Yes, too many exams but people are in the same position as everyone else, so, it's not like they're having a lot of fun while you're studying. Everyone is sort of concentrating on what they have to do to get the grades. (Kenneth:3:55)*

6.5.2 Examinations as a motivator for learning

In general, the students interviewed felt that examinations gave them a clear goal (what grades to aim for) and they tended to work harder when examinations were near. Below are some of their comments in response to the question of whether they thought taking examination was a good way to learn; they showed the students' utilitarian attitude towards learning: that examinations showed proof of their learning.

> *It gives you like an ultimate goal, doesn't it? If you weren't tested for what you have learned, then you won't feel obliged (Frank:3:50).*
>
> *Say, a couple of months to go, you just kind of relax, but when exams get closer and closer, you get more disciplined. (Aaron:3:75)*
>
> *Learning as at the level we are at, you have to prove that you've got certain amount of knowledge to get certain certificate and things like that. (Edward:3:35)*
>
> *I think if you didn't do an exam, you wouldn't bother to learn it. (Liz:3:33)*
>
> *You can show what you've learned in the exams. If you didn't do exams then how would you know you've learned? (Brian:3:69)*

From the students' responses, it was quite clear that their motivation to learn was driven by the extrinsic rewards. They focused on satisfactory completion of the examination (the task) and the award of examination grades afterwards (the reward); the effect was that student learning could be dictated to a large extent by strategies (Entwistle, 1998).

6.6 Resit strategies

6.6.1 Strategies of teachers and students

The results of both the questionnaire survey and the student interviews suggest that the students relied fairly strongly on their teachers' advice on resit choices. On the other hand, the college managers interviewed all stressed that teachers could give advice but the decision whether to resit or not resided entirely with the students.

> *If they have a result which is particularly low, we would encourage them to resit but it's their decision. (FE-College:56)*
>
> *We don't insist; it's up to the student to talk through with their parents. One of the reasons is that students have to pay for the resits themselves. (SF-College:8)*
>
> *Resit is a discussion between the pupil, parent and the college. (IND-College:9)*

Yet, a lot of time seemed to have been spent in all three colleges by both teachers and students on formulating resit strategies, largely by working out the 'sums' to maximize the final scores. Below are two examples, the first from a teacher and the second from a student (different colleges); in both cases, the original quotes are much more detailed.

> *We've got this grid system that has got all the UMS points on it and all the raw points and it has got like an AS and A grid, and we write their scores in each module and we work out what they want to get in A2, and we work out the maths …. decide whether they should resit or not.... and we do it through the year. (Psychology:46)*
>
> *I worked out what I needed to get As at A levels, so I added up all the modules and saw how many points I needed…. In BS, I need like 140 with two more units to go, I went to speak to my teacher…. I will redo unit one again because it's like 20 more marks there, then you can get 2Bs in A2, you'll get an A. (Jack:3:37)*

6.6.2 Factors in resit strategies

When asked how they thought their students made resit decisions, the college managers and teachers all said that in general, need came before ability.

> *If they felt they needed to improve because they needed the grade to get into university for a particular course then the college would support their resit entry. But if a student is really only a D or C, saying I need an A, we would be realistic with them too. (SF-College:10)*

> *I think they always start with need first because they are so focused on getting into university. So, it's always need first, then ability; well, it's not the best way round, but it's all about university. (Psychology:71)*
>
> *If they feel they need to resit for the additional UMS points, then of course we would help out. Quite a lot of students do think along those lines and that's fine. (Maths:67)*
>
> *The pupils and their parents to some extent are relying on us for professional advice and obviously it depends on the aspiration of that particular pupil. If they want to have a good go at Oxbridge, for example, they need 85% plus in their AS exams and will need to resit if below that. (IND-College:12)*

As for choosing which units to resit within a subject, the strategy was to get the best combination of marks for the desired subject grade. The most common tactic was to resit the easier AS units or the units with the lowest marks in the module. The amount of thought and planning that had gone into the strategy was often very detailed; half of the students interviewed (from different colleges) talked at length about how they decided which subjects or what units to resit (how to 'play the system').

> *The total mark for all the modules added together, say, 80% or above, you'll get an A. So, if I like do the easier AS modules and get higher marks, then for A2, I won't actually have to put that much pressure on myself. It's all about sums. (Doris:1:47)*
>
> *It would depend on how high or low my grade was like, how easy it was to raise the grade, and also whether it could have a possibility that it could drop down. I resit the module so it would be definite, even if I muck up the A2 level. (George:1:21)*

On the other hand, three students said they simply resat almost everything and 'hoped for the best'. The 'nothing to lose' argument was occasionally used in the interview and one student from the Independent College said that the idea came from her teachers:

> *Oh, my teachers told me. They said there's nothing really to lose if you resit it again because if you get bad, you still get your old grade and if you do get better then it improves it….Even when you get an A, there's always a better A, do you know what I mean, and I've got nothing to lose in resitting it again. (Nicole:1:34,37)*

As commented by the following college manager, the issue at hand was whether the students had a proper revision plan for the resit.

> *They enter all of those subjects they didn't do very well in and don't have a revision strategy of how they're going to improve their grades. They seem to think that it will just happen. (SF-College:38)*

6.7 Revision tactics

6.7.1 Little support from college and teachers in resit preparation

All three colleges put on revision sessions, clinics or 'subject extensions' which were provided largely for students taking the examination for the first time but resitters could join in. However, they were normally held outside lessons and the timetabling might not be convenient to the resitters.

> *I haven't really got much help, not really. They did put on some revision sessions, but there weren't many of them and the timing wasn't really flexible. Yes, you have to ask if you're re-doing AS. (Aaron:2:70)*

> *Sometimes they put on extra lessons or they give you past papers to do; for the resits, you have to ask for them specifically. (Liz:1:55)*

There seemed to be more help in the Independent College but fees were usually charged for the special clinics.

> *A couple of days after college they will run clinics which will definitely be helpful but they could be quite expensive. I think the majority of the revision will be done on our own rather than with the college's help. (Kenneth:1:46)*

In general, the students had to approach the teachers for specific help and how much help was offered often depended on the individual teachers. Since resits were optional, some teachers did not necessarily feel obliged to do 'extras' for resitters, as indicated by the comments of the teachers from the Sixth-Form College and FE College below:

> *The big issue with our department, we split. Some people think that it's vital to have revision sessions for resitters as exam result for the department is vital, and the other half think that it's actually not our job that they're resitting, it's actually up to them and we are giving the wrong message to the students; so because of this, we've gone for an official line of 'no'. (Psychology:129)*

> *To a certain extent, where a student has decided to resit an exam, it's his or her responsibility to approach us for additional support and request it. We then try to fit the 2nd-year students into maybe the 1st-year workshop. They could request some past papers; we wouldn't necessarily mark anything but should a student have a query, he or she could bring it to a workshop. We just feel that we are enabling students to resit without necessarily bending over backwards to help them do that. (Maths:97)*

The QCA review (2007a, para.7) reports that the "majority of state schools and further education colleges said that past papers tended to be all that was offered to resitting candidates". According to the interviews, giving students past papers to revise for the resits seemed also to be common practice among all three colleges. Such a practice could have negative consequences when the students were left to interpret the question requirements on their own. More about this will be discussed in Chapter 7.

6.7.2 Revision time not a great concern for the students

One concern about resits is whether students have enough time to revise because they have A2 modules to learn and other examinations to take. According to the college managers, the students were not normally given any study leave for resits, except maybe the afternoon or morning off prior to the examination.

The questionnaire findings suggest that revision time was a moderate concern for the students; its importance in the students' resit decision was rated above average, at 3.7, i.e. a little above the mid-point of the 5-point scale[17].

Revision did not seem to be a major worry for the students interviewed. The students claimed that they could always manage to find time for revision, sometimes at the expense of not doing sports or other extracurricular activities. The important thing to them was how widespread the examination timetable was and the fact that there was usually a gap between AS and A2 examinations helped.

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[17] The ratings are based on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 5 indicating that the student viewed the factor as "extremely influential/important" and 1, as "not at all influential/important". A rating of 3.7 is a little above the midway point toward the positive (extremely important) end of the scale, which indicates an impression of someone with a mildly positive attitude towards the importance of the factor of revision time in his or her resit decision (Oppenheim, 1966).

> *In the summer, you've got AS before half term and then A2 like three weeks after, so it didn't really make any difference in terms of revision for the resits. (Jack:2:102)*

> *The exam dates are quite separate, so even though I resat three extra modules, it didn't matter because I could still get quite adequate revision time. (Peter:3:10)*

Most students preferred to revise just before the examination. Their argument was that they might forget if they revised too early. Their revision timetable was therefore very much linked to the examination timetable.

> *I am one of those people that benefit from a lot of revision fairly close to the exam. I sort of structure my exam and my revision timetable around what exams including resits. (Kenneth:3:53)*

> *It's all going to be better in your head if you've done it right before the exam than if you revised it two months ago. I started a few days before the resit. (Helen:2:46)*

6.7.3 Dubious revision tactics of some students

With the heavy focus on examination success and, given the opportunities to resit, some students resorted to some dubious tactics in revising for the examination, as shown by the comment of the teacher below:

> *There is probably more trying to 'box clever'; they might be more concerned with one exam, thinking if I really focus on this one, and if I don't do well in that one, I can always resit that. Certainly if they do not plan their revision or their time well, they're always struggling with particular subjects. (PE:29)*

His comments matched the tactics described by half of the students interviewed. An example is given below of how a student justified his strategy of focusing on one subject while ignoring the other in the January examination in order to try to get a good result for the former and relying on resit in June for the latter.

> *If I get the Psychology resits perfect then I don't have to redo that in the summer, I just have to redo S2…. This is better than if I put the time equally and I've done like okay on both of them, let's say I got two Bs, I would have to retake both of them in June to try and get the A. (Kenneth:3:27,28)*

I asked the students how they revised for resits in general. Only three mentioned analyzing their performance (e.g. feedback from the first examination) and focusing on

the areas they were weak at in revision. As for the rest, one said that she revised mostly everything while others talked about using tactics, including revising only certain topics where they were given question choices or focusing only on their teachers' predictions, as shown in the examples below:

> *There are 4 topics.. I revised 3 out of 4 and you only need to answer 2 out of 4, so if I revised 3 topics, then it gives me a choice. You probably can get away with revising just 2, but then it could be a hard question so I just revised 3. (Brian:2:29)*

> *For Politics, I concentrated on a couple of different topics so I didn't have to revise everything; the same with History. I just went through a few main things the teachers said generally come up quite a lot. (Aaron:2:15)*

> *Quite often the teachers predict what's going to come up, what questions that haven't come up for a while, so you can focus on those. (Liz:2:66)*

6.7.4 Surface approach to learning

The students interviewed did not seem to think there was anything wrong with using tactics in revision; they came across as trying to show off their 'cleverness': it was all about 'beating the system'. One student explained to me in great detail (a much truncated version is given below) his understanding of the 'modular' approach to learning and how he studied and revised for A levels.

> *Basically your brain sort of goes from one part of the subject to the next and use all the information, dump that, use the next sort of information and get rid of that. So, you've just got to read, learn like the next part of the syllabus and then do those modules and do the resits if you need to…. Once you've revised that, you've got to get rid of that and not think about it. You've just got to keep moving on…. Yeah, it's very mechanical but there's not really another way to do it. (Kenneth:3:31,32)*

The learning style depicted above is typical of students adopting a surface or shallow approach to learning rather than deep learning (Biggs, 1988; Entwistle, 1998). The resulting strategy is essentially reproductive, concentrating on the surface features or 'signs' of learning rather the meanings or implications of what is learned. The outcome is that the students are unlikely to retain their knowledge. This was quite clear from the following comment of another student interviewed who had good examination grades:

> *When I revise, I learn, learn, learn, do all my revision, do the exam and then a couple of weeks later, I've forgotten all of them. Guess it's how your brain works in that you're done, you did the exam, you think, I don't need this anymore. The whole process then repeats itself when I resit. (Michelle:3:30)*

The consequence of this 'learning to forget' approach was observed by some of the university admission tutors, as will be discussed in Chapter 7.

6.8 Unnecessary resits and the lack of an effective deterrent

6.8.1 Unnecessary resits

According to the teachers, while awarding bodies may be trying to close the gap slightly between AS and GCSE, A levels still represent a significant jump from GCSE. As discussed in Chapter 5, many of the students resat because they did not recognize early the challenges of A levels or the knock-on effects of resits. Half of them admitted that, had they been briefed about this more adequately by their college, they could have adopted a more positive approach to their studies earlier and some of the resits might then be unnecessary. The sentiment was summed up by the following student:

> *Right from AS you should know what you can do, about exams and resits. I mean they concentrate on the year ahead, they don't concentrate on the two years ahead. (Helen:1:21)*

Other resits were unnecessary because the students were entered for the examination early as a 'rehearsal' or 'trial', which was not the intention of the resit policy. The third kind of unnecessary resits were those which already had a good grade (grade A or the minimum expected grade) in the initial attempt; the purpose of the resit was not for the examination attainment but for getting a higher score to contribute towards the overall A-level result.

6.8.2 Disruption to the classroom accepted as a 'sacrifice'

From the questionnaire and interview findings, it was quite clear that resits featured strongly in the students' sixth-form education in all three colleges. A high volume of students resitting could be disruptive to teaching, with students missing lessons or spending insufficient time on their homework, as shown by the teachers' comments below.

> *You wouldn't really get anything done in January. I do find it disruptive. You are covering stuff knowing that some people who are resitting other exams are missing it and wonder as to when they might catch up again. (PE:38)*
>
> *Sometimes, it can be a bit difficult for the teachers when the students are missing lessons because of the resits; they've got their minds on other things rather than their current homework and their program of study. (Maths:122)*

The disruption to the classroom, however, did not appear to be a major concern for the colleges, which seemed to accept it as a 'sacrifice', as shown by the comments of the college managers below:

> *In January in Year 13, we basically lose a month of teaching because some would be resitting something but the college's view is that it's still worthwhile because if you can improve and consolidate in that January, you are actually giving yourself a better June. So we kind of accept that as a sacrifice. (IND-College:47)*
>
> *I think the subject teachers do push for resits because obviously they want good grades for their subjects and that is kind of regardless of what people do in other subjects, only their own. (FE-College:59)*

6.8.3 Resit fees not a major concern for the students

Resits are optional and the additional examination fees could be a deterrent to some students. In all three colleges, resit fees were paid by the students (or their parents), with the exception of some cases where they might be paid by the subject department, but these were rare. Resit fees, however, did not seem to be a major concern for the students in the study. On the questionnaire, 'exam fees' was given a mean rating of 2.6 on a 5-point scale in terms of its importance in resit considerations (see Figure 5.7). All the students interviewed said that their parents would pay for their resits if it meant a chance for them to improve. According to one college manager, quite a few students paid for their own resits, as shown also in the remark of the following student.

> *If I had to pay for it, I would happily do that. If it's like a hundred pounds maybe that'll be difficult but it isn't, it's just time and effort. (Edward:1:34)*

It was perhaps understandable why the students and their parents adopted such an attitude because the unit resit fees did not seem like a lot and the students valued the importance of improvement and chance for improvement much more strongly (see the ratings in Figure 5.7). Even for students from low-income families, resit fees did not

seem to be an issue: students with education maintenance allowance (EMA) rated the importance of 'exam fees' on the questionnaire at 3.0 (mid-point) on the 5-point scale. The following comment was made by one of the students interviewed:

> *It they get EMA, 30 pounds a week, the exams are only 20 pounds to resit. I mean if they care that much, they should put their EMA towards it. (Doris:1:102)*

According to the college managers, the only real deterrent seemed to be the late fees (double the original fees). Two of the students interviewed decided not to enter for more resits in June because they had missed the entry deadline. The high late fees could also be a reason why students did not take long to decide whether or not to resit, as found in the questionnaire analysis.

In other words, as long as the colleges and teachers did not discourage resits despite their drawback of disruption to the classroom and, given that resit fees did not seem to be an issue for the students or their parents, the students viewed resits almost like an entitlement.

6.9 Summary

The research findings suggest that, apart from the initial excitement of a new learning environment with more freedom and independence, most of the two years of sixth-form for the students involved in the study seemed to be spent sitting and resitting examinations. The aim was to achieve success at A levels and resits were used to help achieve that goal. Practices, including taking examinations early, formulating elaborate resit strategies, employing dubious revision tactics and taking multiple resits regardless of necessity, were often adopted. All these point to one conclusion: the students were motivated by the extrinsic rewards of examination grades rather than the intrinsic rewards of the learning itself. The result was that many of them adopted a surface approach to learning rather than deep learning, which may ill-equip them for university education, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

7 Teaching to the examination, resits and their impact on the roles of A levels

7.1 Introduction

The discussion so far has been on how students make use of resits and how it affects their learning in sixth-form education. This chapter looks at the relationship between A levels and sixth-form education as a whole and the implications of resits on the certification and selection roles of A levels. First, I want to examine more closely the practice of teaching and learning to the examination in A levels.

7.2 Teaching and learning to the examination

In addressing the situation of teaching and learning to the examination in sixth-form education, three issues are relevant: the transparency of assessment in A levels, the perceived need by students, teachers, schools and colleges for teaching and learning to the examination and the impact of that on student learning.

7.2.1 Transparency of assessment and the use of examination documents

7.2.1.1 Need for transparency in public examinations

To promote transparency of assessment, all A level awarding bodies in England publish their examination requirements including past question papers and marking schemes. In my career as a public-examinations administrator in Hong Kong over the past two decades, I have gone through the period from when examination documents were kept confidential to when they were made available to the public. I am in agreement that public examinations should not be shrouded in secrecy. Previously, when there was no public access to examinations documents, teachers who worked for examining boards, including setters, moderators, examiners and markers, were seen as having the privilege of being admitted to an almost 'secret' society (Lambert and Lines, 2000). The knowledge of what examiners look for and how students' work is marked provides insights that can be of enormous help within the classroom. In my experience, the more secretive the documents, the more determined teachers and schools are to gain access to them in order to 'help their students'. For instance, years ago, my office used to keep

the multiple-choice papers of some subjects confidential because their questions were selected every year from a central item bank and a small number of the items could be repeated in subsequent examinations (e.g. for the purpose of comparing standards). Examination centres were required to return all copies of the question papers immediately after the examination. During those years, we had to deal frequently with reports of teachers and invigilators sneaking out of the examination hall to make photocopies of the multiple-choice papers.

It is important and justified that students should know what they are assessed on, how they are assessed and what standards of achievement are expected of them. Transparency opens up the playing field much more fairly to all students, teachers, schools and colleges.

7.2.1.2 The inappropriate use of examination documents

The issue with assessment transparency, in my experience, is not about openness in accessibility, but about how the examination documents are used. Using past papers to revise for the examination seems to be a practice encouraged, not just by teachers, but by government as well, as shown in the following advice found on the government website:

> Revising for exams is about more than just reading through the notes you made in class. It also means knowing how to answer the questions for real when you're in the exam. Practising with old exam questions can improve your chances of doing well.
>
> Directgov (n.d.c)

As discussed in Chapter 6, the most common help the students in the three colleges received from their teachers in resit preparation was being given past papers to practise. Very often, these were not marked or checked by their teachers; instead, the students were given marking schemes to check their own answers or to use them for revision. Some of the students' practice was improper and a source for concern. Their perception was that examination papers generally followed a certain trend or pattern and if they studied many past papers and marking schemes, they could predict what would be more likely to come up in the examination. One danger of this was that when the students saw a 'familiar' question in the examination, they might assume that it was the same as the

practice one, without reading the question properly in terms of the context or requirements.

> *For Biology, you can go through past papers and that will show you how to answer because the same question will come up again and again and you can just remember it from the marking scheme rather than actually learning out of a book. (Liz:2:47)*

> *We were given like all the past papers, in Psychology and Classics, and basically told that certain questions are more likely to come up. You look at all the exam questions and you can put more effort into the ones that haven't come up most recently. (Kenneth:2:10)*

> *If you do loads of past papers in Maths, the questions will be like mostly the same. They might change a few numbers on the equations but that's about it really; even if you get the answers wrong you will still get the method marks. (Doris:1:37)*

Another danger is that the students might rely heavily on the type of questions in the past papers so that when a 'new' type came up in the examination, they were at loss as to how to handle it.

> *Sometimes when they ask you some key words, maybe they change the marking scheme for that question then if you remember the old key words but not know the new ones then you're in trouble. (Peter:2:36)*

> *Some of the questions that came up this time, I haven't seen them before. I did all the past papers from 2002 up for all the C4, but some questions didn't come up. I was like what, what's that? I got really stressed. (Doris:2:7)*

> *It was a bit annoying. I wasn't expecting some of the questions they gave me or they were phrased differently than I had expected them to be. (Kenneth:2:8)*

The practice of students using marking schemes on their own can also be risky because of possible misinterpretation. Marking schemes are essentially working documents for examiners and markers. By making them public, that purpose has changed as they are no longer intended solely for those who have good knowledge of the subject and understand the examination requirement and assessment criteria well. In my experience, a marking scheme would have to be fairly well written to ensure no ambiguity if it were to become an open document. For instance, if a marking scheme only shows a number of alternative answers to a question without indicating why they are all 'acceptable', students using it may not fully appreciate the differences or similarities in the various answers and simply draw their own conclusions. In a way, to

avoid it being used as a 'learning' document, a marking scheme which is 'vague' has some merits (but this may have implications for marking standards and consistency as it relies on the professional judgement of individual examiners). Below is the comment of a student about 'vague' marking schemes:

> *The marking schemes of Classics, like essay-questions, they are very vague because they say, make sure the students demonstrate a certain amount of knowledge or make sure they've done the details. Okay, what does that really mean? (Kenneth:2:14)*

According to the students interviewed, they largely treated marking schemes like 'model answers' and used them in revision specifically to see 'what the examiners look for' and 'how to score marks'.

> *The teachers like say, you've got to mark your own practice papers so that you know how the examiner thinks and what they want you to learn in the exams in order to get the marks. (George:3:51)*

> *With the 60-mark question ((in Politics)), 30 of those marks are on analysis, so you just have to show that you understand it and back up your point with something and then analyze it. (Doris:2:32,33)*

> *The way I revised Biology, it was completely looking through all the marking schemes. (Michelle:2:37)*

The examples given above regarding the use of past papers and marking schemes suggest that the students focused on demonstrating competence in the examination rather than learning to master the subject knowledge or skills. In other words, the students aimed for performance goals rather than learning goals (Dweck and Leggett, 1988). The effect of this on student learning was observed by the university admissions tutors interviewed, as shown in the following comment:

> *Transparency is good as a general principle I think. But there is a danger of things becoming too narrow in that students only focus their learning on what is going to be assessed. (Social Work:42)*

7.2.1.3 Beyond assessment transparency – the practices of awarding bodies

Another issue associated with assessment transparency is the 'aids' awarding bodies provide to help teachers improve the examination performance of their students. For example, OCR has produced an examination database product (called 'ExamQuest')

containing examination questions, marking schemes and examiner's reports, which it claims "will help teachers save hours of time in compiling homework, tests and mock exams from real OCR questions" (OCR, n.d.). The service may be provided with good intentions but with such help, teachers are more likely to make use of the examination materials for setting homework or assignments for their students rather than creating their own based on the students' needs.

It has been reported that some examiners from Edexcel allegedly run fee-paying courses to show teachers how to 'structure the perfect answers', and there are also allegations that some examinations may be easier than others (Telegraph, 2010). The 'easiness' to predict what might come up in the examination with some awarding bodies was mentioned by the Mathematics teacher in the interview, as follows:

> *There are some exam boards where the exam questions and the syllabus content are arranged in such a way that it's almost ridiculously easy to predict and if I were to give an example, AQA Core 1, at some point of the question it would say define the relationship between a line and a circle, it will always be tangent (small laughs). And so, as soon as you mention tangent, you get a mark, which, I think, mathematically, is disgusting. (Maths:113)*

7.2.2 The need for teaching and learning to the examination

7.2.2.1 Views of college managers and teachers

The question of whether teachers taught to the examination was put to the college managers in the interview. Their response was candid and open as they explained that teachers needed to teach to the examination because examination results mattered most to the students. They pointed out that, very often, it was the students themselves who demanded that the teaching be confined to what was required in the examination.

> *Students.. they do ask questions, such as what has this got to do with the exam and so on.. which is a shame in many ways that everything is exam-driven…. I think the teachers feel there is a pressure on them to teach to the exam to get good results. (SF-College:52,53)*

> *The students themselves are very target driven, and it gets to the point when they get loads of teaching to the exam. Some of the students get a bit frustrated with Music. They don't think that they were taught what's in the exam even though that is really good knowledge to have, but the students will get frustrated like if it's not on the syllabus. (FE-College:68)*

The college manager of the Independent College emphasized that past papers were sometimes used by teachers, not 'to teach to the examination', but as a way to demonstrate how the concept taught in class fitted into the examination requirement.

> *Quite a lot of teachers will teach part of a topic or concept, and the last 5 minutes, will say, right, here is a past-paper question on this bit of concept and then give 1 mark, 3 marks, 4 marks just to help demonstrate to pupils how what was being taught fits into the exam requirement. (IND-College:62)*

As for the teachers, they sounded as if they had no choice but to teach to the examination because of the high stakes attached to A-level results, not only for their students but also for their own position as teacher or head of the subject. The following quotations captured not only the reasons but the feelings, almost like resignation, of the teachers.

> *I'm part of the system as far as teaching is; here is something to teach and here are what and how they're going to be examined. But I do often hate the question, do we need to know that. You either educate them to go for the exam or try to give them the knowledge of the subject and, particularly with the early takings on January modules, you really are teaching to the exam rather than let them explore the subject. (PE:52)*

> *We'd love to go off in big tangents but no, no, to the exam. I think more and more students expect you to. They look at the spec and the exam papers, and are very clued up…. The most things to them are the results at the end of the day…. When my results come out, we are told that it's not about the results, it's about how you develop your department and all of it. Ultimately, it's about results, yes, because, regardless of what everyone says, it is important. I am head of a department, I am tested on those results, and I have to explain those results. (Psychology:135-139,144)*

> *Obviously we need the results. We explain to the students the way that Maths has been laid out and what is to be expected, and we would look at the current themes in exam papers. But to be honest, because it's a subject like Maths, just by teaching not necessarily teaching to the exam, there's always a possibility of that particular type of question coming up. Maths is just Maths. (Maths:117)*

7.2.2.2 Students' expectations

The responses of the college managers and teachers reflected the significance of accountability in A levels. Examination results are not only an assessment of the students' performance, but also that of the teachers, affecting their professional status and promotion prospects, as well as the schools and colleges, affecting their position in

the league tables (Gipps, 1994; Broadfoot, 1996). As pointed out by Stobart (2008, p.159), "in such assessment cultures, only the more confident teachers and schools will risk encouraging self-regulated learning and self and peer assessment. For most, the job is to cover the curriculum and prepare for the test".

As for the students, good teaching was often associated with how well the teacher prepared them for the examination, as shown in the comments of the following students:

> *It depends on how they teach, how many tests they give you. Tests are good. They encourage you to learn it earlier so it's easier to revise and prepare you for the exams. (Liz:2:72-74)*

> *Of course, it's all about exams, isn't it? It's not about how you think, because there's only one way of thinking and that's the exam technique. If they're good teachers, they will teach you but also prepare you for the exam; those two things normally go together. (Helen:1:94)*

7.2.3 Effects of teaching and learning to the examination

According to Madaus, Russell and Higgins (2009), when examinations are used to drive teaching and learning, they can narrow what is taught in the classroom and change the way it is taught; the effect of this on student learning can be both positive and negative.

7.2.3.1 Positive effect on student learning

On the positive side, by using certain types of questions (e.g. essays and open-response questions), high-stakes examinations can lead teachers to increasing emphasis on specific skills desirable for educational purposes (e.g. writing and communication skills). For example, the Psychology teacher talked in the interview about the good effects on her students when the examination emphasis changed from recall to application.

> *It's much better, much harder as well…. because now you have to really know and understand it which, if they're going to university, it's much better, much more prepared. (Psychology:58,60)*

Some of the positive effects on student learning are also obvious in the students' descriptions of how they learned, such as reading and analyzing information in source-

based questions, analyzing events from different angles in case studies and structuring their arguments in essay writing.

> *In History we did a bit of work using sources in the lesson and she gave us some technique…. Before I was just writing about the source and she showed us how to summarize the source to show you understand what it means and then analyze it. (Cathy:2:13,14)*

> *Like Business case study, they want to see that you've read it so you have to take out examples, and build your argument up to a certain point and then you say this could happen, like counter it, in a sort of pendulum approach. (Nicole:2:32)*

> *My essays in Psychology, when I started doing them, I liked to waffle a lot. Now I learn, rather than taking your time in writing, just be concise, make sure that people can understand what you're talking about and move on to the next point. (Kenneth:2:18)*

7.2.3.2 Negative effect on student learning

The negative effect, on the other hand, is that teaching can be narrow and instruction-focused, so much so that students respond only to the type of questions found in the examination and 'rehearse' their answers. According to Torrance (2007), transparency of assessment encourages instrumentalism with the result that assessment procedures and practices can come to completely dominate the learning experience and weaken, rather than strengthen, the development of learner autonomy. More than 15 years ago, Gipps (1994, p.56) pointed out that "the kind of drill-and-practice instruction that tests reinforce is based on outmoded learning; rather than improving learning, it actually denies students opportunities to develop thinking and problem-solving skills". More recently, Sadler (2007) observes how the focus of teaching becomes more on getting students through the system to achieve the qualification than learning itself; he points out that this practice serves to diminish the very point of having the qualification and warps the students' understanding of what it means to learn.

Even in the 'positive' examples quoted earlier, every student could end up using the same style of approach or writing the same kind of responses to certain types of question. In other words, there was no originality or creativity in the students' answers and students ended up following the rules of 'what the examiners look for' and writing rigidly rather than creatively.

> *We have to, in the introduction, state all the important factors, state your arguments and then you have to link in the title and the arguments and it's the same with every essay, and we have done it over and over again. The skills you learn from doing two years of History. (Michelle:2:38)*

> *I learned how to get marks basically, like using big words in English. I learned it from my teachers…. I mean A levels is about getting the marks, isn't it? It's about showing what you know to the people in the exam. (Doris:2:36,37)*

> *In Physics there's something which says you need to write-- have quality of written communication and, as we're told by our teachers, that means you have to put everything in bullet points. (Edward:2:25)*

Another negative effect on student learning is that the focus on teaching to the examination might take precedence over the actual teaching of the subject itself. As remarked by some of the students interviewed, even though preparation for the examination was important, some teachers spent too much time telling them what they should do in examinations rather than teaching.

> *They always say that this is the way we have to do in exams…. and that can go on a bit without really teaching the stuff. They'll say that's how you should answer in the exam but they don't explain why. You can ask questions, but they won't give you a lot of details. (Jack:1:64,66)*

> *In Politics, we do a lot of essay plans. We don't really get a chance to enjoy what you're being taught, sort of the ideology behind that. In secondary school, we had time to discuss it with our teachers but at the moment, you need to get a topic done, do it quick and it's like you lose the sense of fun of education when you're gearing it towards exams. (Nicole:3:53)*

7.2.3.3 Better examination results but not necessarily better learning

With reference to the effect of the 'test score pollution' in the United States years ago caused by practices of teaching test-taking skills and preparing teaching objectives to match the tests, Gipps (1994) points out that sometimes, examination results can be improved without students actually mastering the skills or constructs being assessed. Using evidence supported by different research, Black (2000) highlights incidences in which high-stakes examinations will show improvement in results over time as teachers learn how to meet the demands of the examination but there can be no real gain in learning. Stobart (2008) suggests that the effect of examination coaching is that it aims at getting examination results rather than enriching learning. According to Torrance (2009), coaching and practice may have an initial impact on results but this 'rise in

standards' tends to tail off over time as the marginal additional benefits of coaching decline.

Broadfoot and Pollard (2000) call it a 'performance model' in which students are defined by examination performance which is objectified by grades and teachers instruct and assess based entirely on the procedures and criteria set out by the examinations. They suggest that, rather than acquiring lifelong skills and attitudes, the effect of an education which is dictated by assessment, scores and grades is that students become more dependent on their teacher and less ready and able to engage in deep learning. Below is the quotation of a student which shows how she relied on her teacher to provide examples in support of different theories rather than researching her own.

> *In Politics, you need examples to back up your points and I'm no good. He was going through the theories and what examples are best to fit with the theory, which is really good for me so I just memorize those examples. (Nicole:2:10)*

7.3 Multiple purposes of A levels

Like most public examinations, A levels serve a number of purposes (Goldstein and Lewis, 1996). They communicate information about students' achievement in sixth-form education through the issue of grades on examination certificates (a certification role). They help universities and employers select candidates for degree courses or jobs (a selection role). They are an instrument of control by government (an evaluation role) in monitoring the performance of schools, colleges and teachers through recognition (e.g. beacon-schools), status (e.g. league tables) and monetary awards (e.g. funding and salaries). Since the objective of this research is on student learning, the focus of the discussion will be on the certification and selection roles of A levels.

7.4 The certification role of A levels

7.4.1 Certification needs of sixth-form education

Generally speaking, the role of certification is about the connection between the learning that has taken place and what the student is able to do in order to meet current or future needs (Broadfoot, 1996). According to Gardner (1995, 2004), human beings possess multiple intelligences; viz., logical-mathematical, linguistic, musical, spatial,

bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal, and they differ from one another in their intellectual profiles. Gardner argues that multiple intelligences favour multiple means of teaching and assessment and this should be borne in mind in education. It has been suggested that, with the dominance of universities, employers and government on what is taught in schools, education in schools in England tends to focus on linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences and the other intelligences are largely ignored (Guardian, 2007).

Hodgson and Spours (2008) suggest that the aims of the English 14-19 education in comparison to other countries are very narrow, with no clear vision, and are designed largely to raise educational participation and performance. In its report, *Education for All: The future of education and training for 14-19 year olds*, the Nuffield Review (2009) asks 'what counts as an educated 19 year old in this day and age' (Pring et al., 2009). It lists several qualities including knowledge, competence, practical capability, moral seriousness, community participation and self-awareness, and proposes that the core aim of education and training is the 'whole-person' development.

All the qualities and intelligences mentioned above are important in the development and preparation of sixth-form students for higher education and adult life, but not all of them are, or can be, tested and certified by A levels, due to the limitations of public examinations (Madaus, Russell and Higgins, 2009). Pring et al. (2009, p.72) raise the concern that the current assessment regime scarcely recognizes practical, social and experimental learning and focuses mainly on what is more easily measurable. As commented by the following student, there is nothing on the A levels certificate to show qualities such as self-motivation and independence of learning:

> *The flaw in the system is: you can go the extra mile, being self-motivated and independent in your learning and have nothing to show for it. (Helen:1:14)*

Similarly, the aims and values of schools and colleges which are not directly related to examination results, such as promoting autonomy, equality and justice, receive very little 'official' recognition (Pring et al., 2009). Judgement of education solely by examination success reflects a very restricted understanding of educational objectives and it is wrong to presume that what cannot be measured is not important (Weeden, Winter and Broadfoot 2002; Pring et al., 2009). Falchikov and Boud (2004) stress that

the influence of examination grades in high-stakes examinations persists beyond formal education, but its formative function that helps students learn operates often only at the time of delivery. What is at stake is whether students learn what benefits them, such as the transferable skills to prepare them for work and lifelong learning, rather than what gets them the examination grades. In reality, however, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the teaching and learning in sixth-form have all been geared towards complying with the examination requirements in A levels and the resit system is likely to be making it worse with its over-assessment focus.

The scepticism of the public of the continuing success in A levels (Independent, 2009a; Telegraph, 2009a), by intimating that it is the result of teachers and students 'playing the system' through teaching and learning to the examination and multiple resits, suggests that the credibility of A levels as an objective and impartial system of assessing and certifying students' competence in sixth-form education has become questionable. This point was mentioned by one of the admissions tutors interviewed.

> *I think the pressure on the school and teachers to have a good set of results and how that impacts on league tables, already makes A levels a challenging currency. I'm not sure how valid they are as a real measure of somebody's attainment. (Social Work:36)*

7.4.2 Side-lining of the role of certification in sixth-form education

A recent review on the future of the English academic qualifications and assessment system (Sykes, 2010) describes the purposes of A levels as providing information about students' knowledge and understanding (a certification role) and assisting universities in making fair selection decisions (a selection role). In practice, helping universities select candidates for admissions seems to be the main purpose of A levels nowadays. As others have commented before, A levels have become *de facto* university entrance examination, a function that is refined further through the specificity of the grades (Lambert and Lines 2000), and A levels are now a 'means to an end': it is all about grades for university rather than knowledge and understanding (de Waal, 2009).

The students were asked in the interview what they wanted to get out of sixth-form education and the significance of A levels. Below are some of their comments.

> *I plan to go to university, so I need to get A levels…. I mean there isn't really much else, that's about it. A levels, get a good one, go to university. (George:1:1,8)*

> *You need A levels to go to university. Don't really think there is anything else I want to get out of sixth-form. I mean, like there isn't really anything else. (Kenneth:1:2,7)*

The students interviewed largely regarded sixth-form education as a stepping stone to university rather than a stage of education on its own. Many did not know what else to expect from sixth-form, apart from getting good A-level grades to get them to university. Their comments suggest that for them, A levels were all about selecting students for university; the certification role of A levels in terms of certifying what they had learned was either ignored or side-lined.

In addressing the paradoxes of high-stakes testing, Madaus, Russell and Higgins cited the following metaphor about high-stakes examinations in England:

> The examination is depicted as a grinding machine and success a form of divine election, with Oxbridge as the heavenly Jerusalem. When the stakes are high, teachers and students do not worry about the niceities of a well-rounded education. The exam is portrayed as the common enemy and any strategy used by teachers or students to cope with it is justified. Prevalent in this literature is a frank admission that what was memorised, regurgitated on the exam, and then quickly forgotten is irrelevant in life after school.
>
> Madaus, Russell and Higgins (2009, p. 143)

The dominance of the selection role of A levels has been around for many years, well before the adoption of the modular system. Back in 1997, Young and Leney observed that the selection needs for university had overtaken the education role of A levels, the result of which was an inevitable implication on standards.

> A levels are not only a gateway to university; like any advanced level curriculum, they also have an educational role. If the educational role of A levels is forgotten, not only does this deny the real learning that A-level students achieve, but the only option for the critic is to say that more people should be allowed to get them. Inevitably, this leads to the charge of 'lowering standards'.
>
> Young and Leney (1997, p.44)

A major concern about the imbalance between the certification and selection roles of A levels is the emphasis of the content of assessment, which can be quite different depending on the purpose of the examination (Gipps, 1994; Broadfoot, 1996; Black, 1998). Generally speaking, the examination emphasis in terms of certification is on validity to ensure as close a match as possible between the skills assessed and real life requirements. The function of selection, on the other hand, is largely linked to the competition which uses the examination results as the determinant. The main emphasis is on whether the ranking produced by the examination outcome is reliable and fit for the purpose of that selection. Hence, to try to serve both functions within the same examination is not easy. According to Pring et al (2009), the government's focus seems to be on 'standards', reliability in assessment and making A levels function better as a selection tool for higher education. The effect of more importance being attached to the selection role of A levels is that the validity requirement in certification in terms of its role in the attestation of competence can be overshadowed by the need to serve the selection needs, whose focus is on reliability and discriminatory power.

7.4.3 Views of college managers and teachers

With the educational aims in mind, I asked the college managers and teachers what they wanted their students to have learned from the two years of sixth-form when they left college.

The college managers generally talked about wanting their students to be equipped with skills for higher education and adult life.

> *First of all, I want them to have academic success, getting the best grades that they possibly could have done. I want them also to be well-rounded individuals who will make contributions to society down the line. (IND-College:74)*

> *We exist because we provide qualification. We teach students and they take qualifications from us in order to enable them to progress to their next stage in education or employment. So, that is sort of realistic and most important. We hope that along the way, the students learn how to be good citizens. (SF-College:73)*

The teachers talked about wanting their students to have passion, understanding and enjoyment of their subject and the ability to use the subject knowledge later in life.

> *The main thing for them is to go to university. Then, I want them to still have I want them to still have the passion, an interest for the subject, even if they don't go on to do it at university. Hopefully, also some long-terms skills that they can use, whether it be fitness, health stuff, in their sport. (PE:88)*
>
> *I want them to have an understanding of the subject, to really understand it, the basics of it, how it works, and to be able to use it in real life, but that's a teacher's dream (small laughs), but ultimately, it's about the exams. (Psychology:141)*
>
> *I would like my students to, first of all, have enjoyed their experience of Maths education and most importantly, I would like them to have achieved the best grade that they could. (Maths:121)*

The comments above show that while both college managers and teachers wanted their students to have the passion for learning and have a well-rounded education, they also emphasized examination success as a priority in sixth-form education.

7.4.4 Expectations of the students

In the final question on the questionnaire, I asked the students to rate the importance of each of five aspects of sixth-form education, including achieving good qualifications for better jobs, making good A-level grades for a place in university, knowledge acquired, skills learned, and the social and learning experience. The last three aspects originated from a study by Jacobs and Newstead (2000) of undergraduate student motivation that classified the aims and objectives of student learning under three areas: knowledge, skills and experience, which I found useful and relevant to sixth-form education and hence included them in the question. All five aspects were rated very high by the students, between 4.1 and 4.6 on the 5-point scale, on the questionnaire.

On the other hand, the responses of the students interviewed to the question of what they wanted to get out of the two years of sixth-form education were unanimous and singular: they talked only of wanting good examination results in order to help them get good qualifications and go to university. They seemed to treat the last three aspects, (knowledge, skills and experience), all as part of the product of the examination (despite examples given in the question, such as leadership as a skill or social interactions as an experience). In other words, the students focused largely on the outcome (the qualification) and not much on the process (the learning, the transferable skills and the experience). Below are some of their comments.

> *Knowledge acquired, well.. it's good but after A levels I doubt that I need to remember any of it, except for Psychology, obviously, that's what I will be doing for a degree but for the rest of things, that's it, and same with skills learnt. (Michelle:1:57)*

> *It's the same exam, same knowledge and skills, but resits do definitely help achieving a better qualification and therefore getting better jobs. The experience aspect is about taking exams. (George:1:91)*

7.4.5 Implications of resits for the certification role of A levels

Resitting examinations is sometimes likened to re-taking driving tests. One student (4051) used this in the questionnaire as the reason why the resit system was fair: "you can resit your driving test". In response to criticisms that allowing students to resit help boost their grades, Jerry Jarvis, Managing Director of Edexcel, was quoted as saying the following (Independent, 2009b):

> *"Only 47 per cent of people pass their driving test the first time. Should we bar the rest from driving?"*

A driving test is a typical criterion-based attainment test. A person with a driving licence is entrusted with the ability to drive on public roads, regardless of the number of test attempts. A successful driving school can have a 100 per cent pass rate and nobody will query its credibility even if that includes multiple attempts by some of its students. Similarly, one can argue that the resit system of A levels is adequate for certifying students' competence and there is no reason why the public cannot accept a near 100 per cent pass rate in A levels, even if some results are achieved through resits.

Reference to the driving-test argument was also mentioned in the research of Pell, Boursicot and Roberts (2009) in their study of resits by medical students in the criterion-based clinical assessment, OSCE (Objective Structured Clinical Examinations) in medical schools. By pointing out that, particularly for a dynamic and ever-changing profession like medicine, qualifications are necessarily time limited, which require a particular level of mental capacity and ability to absorb new knowledge and learn new skills within a certain timeframe, Pell et al. concluded that resitting students have an unfair advantage over those taking the main assessment due to the additional time and support they were given.

The ‘time element’ benefit in the argument of Pell et al. is applicable to A-level resits, but only in terms of individual A-level subject examinations. When the A-level course is treated as a whole, any additional time gained by the student in an A-level resit may mean less time for the other A-level units. As for additional support, the interview findings suggest that the students were not normally given much additional help by their teachers or college in resit preparation. Taken in this light, it can be argued that, as far as the overall A-level qualifications are concerned, students resitting A levels do not necessarily have an unfair advantage over others who do not resit at all, as long as they successfully demonstrate what is required in the examinations and have achieved that within the same two-year period.

7.5 The selection role of A levels

7.5.1 A levels mainly for university admissions

According to Bassett et al. (2009), with 46 per cent of 16 year olds studying A levels compared to 33 per cent doing other qualifications and 76 per cent of students doing A levels go on to university, A levels have become primarily a university entrance examination. The research of Hodgson, Spours and Waring (2005) indicates that the *Curriculum 2000* reform has little impact on university admissions decisions; it is seen by admissions tutors as government’s attempts to meet its 50 per cent higher-education target rather than a higher-education driven initiative, and offers are still made largely on the basis of three A levels. A survey of UCAS in 2003, as quoted by Hodgson, Spours and Waring, shows that over 73 per cent of all university offers were made in terms of A-level results (92 per cent in the case of pre-1992 universities).

In 2009, one in four A levels taken was scored an A grade (JCQ, 2009). The QCDA has introduced A* grades with effect from the 2010 examinations. The move was aimed at improving the selection role of A levels at the top end. Wiliam (2009) queries the error margins of the new A* grades; he argues that it will require a fair number of questions to distinguish between A* and grade A candidates due to the ‘chance’ effect in getting the correct answers. A similar point was made by the admissions tutor for medicine, who suggested that unless the materials in the examination are changed to be made more challenging, the A* awards will merely amount to setting another cutting score at

the top end of the examination which may or may not be designed to test the very top students:

> *That is simply asking for a higher score with the same material. It's not stretching the material…. So that means what the university is trying to do is to find a cheap way of using the existing calibration curve (Medicine:84,85)*

All in all, with the huge number of applications, limited resources and a lack of alternative, reliable and neutrally-gathered information, there seems to be very little choice for universities but to use A-level results and trust the rankings they provide in making selections, as summed up by the admissions tutor below:

> *Within the public accountability issue, you have to put in a hell of an evidence to justify giving the place to that person with a B ((rather than another with an A)) and universities simply don't have the time to test large number of candidates. We have very limited budgets and if you're asking the universities, don't believe in the assessment, you assess yourself, then what is the assessment for? (Medicine:62)*

Perhaps this is the reason why, according to a recent survey (ACS, 2009), 75 per cent of university admissions tutors do not want to see A levels phased out. The same survey, however, also indicates that the majority of admissions tutors do not think that A levels test the qualities in students which are essential for university education. More about this will be discussed later but, first, I want to examine how offers are made by universities and the implications of resits for selection decisions.

7.5.2 Predicted grades and conditional offers

Under the current university admissions system for sixth-form student applicants in England, university offers are in general conditional, made largely on the basis of the students' past examination results and predicted grades in A levels (supplemented by appraisals and personal statements, and interviews in some cases). A school's assessment of a student's performance in A levels is, therefore, of paramount significance in determining a student's chance of success of receiving an offer. Understandably, schools and colleges will want to give as good a prediction as possible for their students and there have been concerns about exaggerations by some of them (Varsity news, 2010). Research by UCAS (2005) shows that predicted grades are only about 45 per cent accurate. In the absence of actual examination results, however, the admissions tutors interviewed all said that they had no choice but to rely

on predictions of schools and colleges for shortlisting student applicants or making offers.

> *We do use predicted grades but we don't put a lot of faith in them. Very often, it just got some vague sweeping statement 'we think he'll get an A'. It's much more interesting now to look at the modular scores that they have achieved. (Computer Science:7)*

> *If the school predicts anything less than 3As, that's the end of the candidate. But if the school predicts 3As, we don't necessarily take it on board because 3As is only a baseline condition for us. (Medicine:16)*

> *From the people we made offers to, it might be predicted that somebody is going to get 3Bs, but he only got a D and an E. I know that sometimes, teachers or schools over-predict to give their pupils a chance. We take their word for it and we have to because of the volume of applications. (Social Work:6,32)*

7.5.3 Implications of resits for the selection role of A levels

Although resits may not be a significant issue as far as certification is concerned, they can be seen as giving some candidates an unfair advantage for selection to university. The admissions tutor for medicine said his department does not consider resitters; his comment about results achieved through resits is as follows:

> *It's still an achievement. But in the light of the massive competition, that one speck on the horizon and you've had it. So, it's not a reflection of the candidate, it's a reflection of the intensity of the competition. (Medicine:27)*

The other two admissions tutors said they would not exclude resitters from their shortlists or offers but would want to know the students' reasons for resitting.

Under the current system, students do not have to enter the results of their AS units on the UCAS application form if they are proceeding onto a full A-level for that subject and intend to resit the AS units (UCAS, n.d.). In processing the students' applications, universities do not normally ask questions about resits; that trend, however, may be changing now (Telegraph, 2009a). It has been reported that some universities now ask for individual unit grades at the end of Year 12 (de Waal and Cowen, 2007b) or stipulate that grades achieved in resits will be ignored (Sunday Times, 2010).

7.5.4 Assessing qualities needed for university education

According to the survey by ACS (2009), only 15 per cent of the 60 university admissions tutors surveyed agreed to the statement that "there is no threat to the quality of post-16 education in terms of preparation for university learning". The report suggests a strong underlying view among admissions tutors that teachers concentrate too much on teaching to the examination and students focus too heavily on sitting and resitting examinations. The point was shared by the admissions tutors interviewed, who generally felt that A-level students learned only what was assessed in the examination and little else.

> *The input I get from the students is that they're less used to thinking for themselves than they're more used to working from being told something and memorizing it. In fact many of them are becoming quite good at being able to sound good but without really understanding. It is an interesting skill that a lot of them are developing. (Computer Science:26)*

> *In Physics, the teachers are instructed to exclude the mathematical content. Now, how do you test Physics if you don't know any mathematics? So, it's been made so modular that what is called Physics is Physics where you can't include any mathematics into it so they arrive unable even with an A to do any Physics. (Medicine:57)*

> *Teachers are under pressure to get better results rather than measures in terms of students' readiness for higher education, in terms of their study skills, their overall literacy standards. Those basic study skills and their approach to learning are just not encouraged by that kind of system. (Social Work:39)*

As pointed out by Mackinnon (2002), tertiary students are expected to acquire more than settled wisdom; they need to develop both intellectual and practical skills to evaluate knowledge claims, to reinterpret and to apply knowledge to new situations. He contends that students who focus on rote learning and examination technique are unlikely to meet these criteria. According to a research study which used focus-group interviews of academic and admissions staff (Wilde and Wright, 2007), some of the undesirable qualities found among A-level students include: examination fatigue, learning exhaustion, instrumental approaches to learning and bite-size knowledge. Another recent survey of admissions tutors (Bassett et al., 2009) also suggests that students from A levels struggle with independent and logical thinking and have a second-chance mentality, and that the observation comes from both 'elite' universities and 'lower-ranking' universities.

Similar comments were made by all three admissions tutors interviewed, who felt that A-level students lacked the passion for learning, learned in a fragmented approach, focused too much on surface learning, emphasized only on examination-related performance goals and failed generally to retain the knowledge acquired. There were also suggestions that additional resources were often needed to bring the students up to the level necessary for university education.

> *We found that IB students, some are more satisfactory than A-level students because of larger blocks being examined. So, for modular system, one starts to ask questions, whether it is a good background for universities. People seem to be arriving much less prepared for university even for those with high scores. (Medicine:48)*

> *I don't think A levels are very good foundations at all for university…. The teaching is very much to assessment criteria and it's not about deep learning, it's not about research, not about independent study. What we want is passion for learning, away from the reading list, away from the criteria, and they're not ready to do that. I have to devise the first-year course that helps bring people to where we need them to be…. I don't think A levels do that at all. (Social Work:12,13)*

> *They come with a much more exam-oriented focus now. They don't want to learn for learning's sake, they don't really want to know about the subject, they want to know if it's going to be on the exam. It's not a positive thing. It's more than exam emphasis; because they do this modular approach and they do the resits. The other problem is that they will turn up having forgotten everything, it's unfortunate but it's true. We need to teach them things we thought they knew. (Computer Science:17)*

As pointed out by the admissions tutor for medicine, one knock-on effect of the poor preparation of students for university education is that if the students end up not being able to cope with the demands of higher education, the failure or drop-out rates in universities could be high or the quality of university education would be compromised.

7.6 Summary

The research findings suggest that resit opportunities, coupled with the competitiveness of university admissions, have resulted in a examination-oriented culture in sixth-form education in the three colleges in the study. Teaching and learning were geared towards what was assessed in the examination. The assumption of A levels being an objective and valid assessment of meeting the aims of sixth-form education and certifying

students' competence according to those aims becomes questionable as the certifying role is overshadowed by the selection role, whose emphasis in assessment is different. At the same time, the focus on surface learning, examination technique and second-chance mentality is not conducive to producing the qualities of students needed for university education either, as commented on by the admissions tutors interviewed. Resits have certain implications for the selection role of A levels; they can be perceived as contaminating the ranking order of student applicants. The admissions tutors interviewed either did not consider resitters or wanted to know more about the students' reasons for resitting. As far as certification is concerned, it can be argued that, as long as the students have demonstrated the competence required in the examination within the two-year course of A levels, whether they have taken resits is of little significance. There are, however, some other, perhaps more obscure, effects of resits on student learning, in terms of how the resit experience shapes their learner identity and learning career. This is discussed in the next chapter.

8 Resits and students' learner identity and learning career

8.1 Introduction

This chapter explores students' identity as learners and the implications of resits on the students' learner identity and learning career. I will start by examining how the fourteen students interviewed perceived themselves as learners generally. This is followed by an in-depth study using the cases of four students to analyze how their differing personal qualities and learning dispositions affected the way they approached the resit challenge. The chapter finishes with an analysis of the different cultures of the three colleges and how these may contribute to shaping the students' learner identity and future learning career.

8.2 Students' perception of themselves as learners

At my first individual interviews with the students in November 2008, I asked them to describe what kind of students they were. The majority of them interpreted the question in terms of work, such as whether they were diligent or lazy, rather than the broader elements I was looking for, such as the motivational, cognitive and affective qualities (Pintrich, 1989). On the other hand, none of the students had any problem answering the question of why they wanted to continue into sixth-form education; they all indicated a wish to go to university and saw A levels as the route to get them there. Most said that they found A levels much harder than GCSE and many were disappointed when they received their AS results in Year 12. In other words, how the students perceived themselves as learners was defined almost entirely by their success or failure in A levels, as shown in the following comment.

> *Universities want someone who is going to be an A-person because that means you've got a wider imagination. I am probably a B-person but I'm still able to think outside the box and stuff like that. (Nicole:1:72)*

Reay and Wiliam (2001) did a study in 1998 of how the SATs (standard assessment tasks) in England shifted children's learner identity. Although their research was on primary school children, I found some of their analysis applicable. Their findings suggest that students' behaviour changes as a consequence of regular examination

practice, often resulting in the students with poor examination results feeling humiliated by being seen as frequent failures and subsequently resorting to withdrawal or avoidance of the task altogether. They conclude: "the narrow focus of assessment, together with the emphasis on achieving the highest scores possible, produces a situation in which unjustifiable educational practices are not only possible, but encouraged" (ibid., p.160). As seen by the evidence presented in the earlier chapters, resits in A levels were often encouraged at the three colleges even when they were not totally necessary, in strategies whose sole aim was to maximize the final results, and students with poor examination results tended to receive less support and advice.

Sixth-form is a very important stage for A-level students; the majority of them started as a 16 or 17 year-old teenager and left as an 18 or 19 year-old adult. Many students start sixth-form without a clear vision of what they want to achieve or do afterwards, but what they do and how they learn during those two years contribute significantly to their future learning career (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999). Resits are optional; they are important decisions with many implications, such as additional workload and examination pressure. However, based on the questionnaire findings, these factors seemed to be largely ignored by most students in the study. Whether students view resits as 'nothing to lose' opportunities or 'life-saving' chances underlies their attitudes towards learning and their perception of themselves as learners. As pointed out by Ecclestone and Pryor (2003), if students see assessment as emotional events, involving risk of failure and sense of self, then an assessment career becomes a powerful strand in the student's learning career with its formation of learning habitus or identity.

In order to study the relationship between the students' learner identity and their resit practice, I used the case studies of four students in the research.

8.3 Case studies

The series of interviews, during which the students were interviewed individually three times each between November 2008 and May 2009, provided valuable data in a brief longitudinal study of how the students approached the challenge of resits in A levels. During the interviews, I formed a general idea of each student in terms of his or her level of confidence, learning style, expectations and strategies. Four students (Helen,

Aaron, Jack and Michelle) stood out with their interesting, varied and revealing stories. They came from different colleges, took different numbers of resits and were different in academic attainment in terms of GCSE and AS results.

The questionnaires and transcripts of the four students were analyzed by using a working template containing a number of analytical themes (***Appendix 17***). Reference was also made to the reflexive journal, which recorded my impressions of the students during the interviews. Below, I will first describe each case individually before comparing the four students' approach to resits in a joint analysis using a model of learning, identity and social setting (Pollard and Filer, 2001).

8.3.1 Helen, who 'finally got it'

Helen was the student with the highest examination results among those interviewed. With her academic record, she could have gone to any school or college for sixth-form (including staying in her old school) but she chose the FE College because she wanted to do music and the college has a good music department. She achieved 6A* and 2A at GCSE. She had already secured a grade A in A-level English Literature by the end of Year 12, during which she also obtained an A in both AS Mathematics and AS Music. Her 'problem', as she perceived it, was that she got only a B in AS History and she wanted four As to go to a Russell Group university to read Music (although she said the conditions in the offer she received were only AAB). I first met Helen shortly after she had registered to resit one unit in AS History in January in Year 13. It was interesting to observe how her attitude towards examinations and resits changed over the three interviews, the second being after the examination and the third, after the results.

My first impression of Helen was that she was passionate about her education. She told me of her disappointment with the AS History result, not just because it was a B, but because she knew the subject well. She felt that resitting was like admitting that she had failed and that she was 'too proud' to want to resit more.

> *I was given the opportunity to do two and it feels like I have failed…. Now, I find everyone is resitting practically everything. Part of me thought, I've got a better mark than you, so I'm more likely to resit less. So, half being sensible and half being proud, and proud won out. (Helen:1:41-43)*

Before she took part in the research, Helen did not know how the resit system worked because there was no briefing by the teachers and she was 'doing fine' with her studies. Her ignorance about the resit rule was evident by her answers on the questionnaire. She did not know how many units or how many times students were allowed to resit or whether the resit result automatically replaced the old one; she only knew that students had to pay for the resit, probably because she had just registered and paid for one.

Helen said she was knowledgeable about History and was therefore frustrated that she either could not or had failed to demonstrate that in the examination.

> *People will play to deadlines and do the work to get a good grade…. I'd rather people who are self-motivated, doing extra reading and broadening your own horizon without being told, but you can't apply that to your grade. (Helen:1:9,14)*

She was confident in her academic ability and said, unlike some of her peers, she had always known what interested her and what she wanted to do later in life. Outside college, she was very active in orchestral activities and wanted eventually to be a musician. Her independence and assertiveness were demonstrated by the fact that she changed class in History between Year 12 and Year 13 because she felt that she was not stretched in the old class (one might also interpret it as her trying to find a 'reason' for her not getting an A, but that was not mentioned).

> *I moved myself because I was just bored in the last class. They were a good bunch of people and she's a good teacher.. just that you always work at the level of "you don't write narrative, you write analysis", and I'm past that. I want to write something good not for something that will cover it. (Helen:2:4)*

She was much happier with the teacher in the new class, whom she described as being both practical and interesting.

> *He just makes sure that you cover everything you need to know for the exam but if you ask him, say, a question off the cuff about something else, he'll happily answer and we'll just get into a long conversation about something completely different, so there's also that interest factor. (Helen:2:2,13)*

In the second interview, I found Helen excited and happy with her resit performance, saying that the new teacher had shown her how to prepare for the examination by structuring her answers and limiting her writing to what was required in the question.

> *My knowledge is the same as last year. It's what you choose to put into a question. Until someone says, oh, the question says this so they're asking you to say A, B, C and you think oh, I would have interpreted it in another way. That's all very well but you won't get any marks for that. (Helen:2:2,42)*

On the back of this positive feedback, I asked her whether she would consider resitting more units of AS History in June. She said it was unlikely because she still disliked the thought of resitting as it made her feel like she had failed.

> *I'll just focus on what I'm doing this year rather than getting bogged down in what we were doing last year and trying to make it better. I don't want to re-do things because I want to do them the best I can the first time. It was really hard for me to have to face doing a resit actually. (Helen:2:25)*

She was so confident that she had corrected what she did wrong in the first examination that it came as a surprise when she told me in the third interview that she had scored worse, down to a C in the resit. The reason she gave was that she had obviously still under-estimated the very basic nature in the examination requirement and had, despite what she said before, again produced answers outside the scope of the question.

> *I have no idea it could be such a basic exam. I thought I'd learned all this structure, but obviously I wasn't writing the facts down. I thought they could see I know all those stuff because I'm giving them more than they want, surely this is good exam technique. I just found out, no, it isn't; you actually need to take it back a stage, which is really difficult. (Helen:3:35)*

She went over the resit with her teacher, who showed her again how to address the requirement in the question rather than writing what she thought would impress the examiner. In a way, the teacher showed Helen that, apart from learning goals, performance goals are sometimes necessary particularly in summative assessment situations like A levels (Heyman and Dweck, 1992; Elliot et al., 2006).

> *He taught me how to write and I thought I already do but writing well and writing for the exam are different things and I thought they were the same …. That's sort of really demoralizing. (Helen:3:22,24)*

> *He said he met a lot of people that have this mentality, almost too clever for the exam and that they're testing the knowledge of the bulk of middle students who just want to learn facts and write them down. I want to learn facts and write my own interpretation of events…. So, it's really strange to have to sort of lessen your argument, that's how I see it, down to that base level and build yourself up again. (Helen:3:26,27)*

Helen felt that the fact that she had to hold back in her answers suggested that the examination was not strenuous enough to test the top students. Her comment echoed criticisms (e.g. Bassett et al., 2009) that A levels could be letting top students down by not being sufficiently demanding to test the highest level of competence. As commented by the admissions tutor for medicine, the award of A* will not solve the issue of discrimination at the top end if the examination material is not stretched to test students at that level.

With the lower grade in the resit and constructive feedback from her teacher, Helen's attitude towards resitting A levels had somewhat changed. She now told me that she would be resitting all units of AS History in June, alongside the A2. She said that she could cope with the additional workload and, since she now understood how to approach the examination 'in the right way', she was confident that she would do much better in the resit in June.

She obviously had 'finally got it'. She wrote me an email in August that she had scored grade A in A-level History, including all the AS units she resat in June. She had achieved four As at A levels and was admitted to study Music at a Russell Group university, her first choice.

8.3.2 Aaron, who was unsure of almost everything

Aaron was a student at the Sixth-Form College. He was probably the weakest academically among those interviewed, with only two Bs, five Cs and one E in the GCSE examinations. He was retaking GCSE Mathematics for the fourth time in Year 13, hoping to get a C but was still unsuccessful. He scored an A in AS Media Studies (slightly to his surprise, he admitted), a D in AS Politics and an E in AS History.

When I first met him, Aaron struck me as soft-spoken, reticent and reserved, not very sure of himself or what he wanted to say. The phrase 'I don't know' was used frequently in the interview (34 times in the first interview, 14 and 18 times in the other

two). He said he continued into sixth-form education after GCSE because he wanted to go to university and was not sure of what else to do.

> *There isn't really much you can do after GCSE so it would be easier to carry on…. I don't know what to expect. People said it's quite hard like I'm expected to work a little bit harder, and it had been. But I don't really know what else. (Aaron:1:4,5)*

When he started sixth-form, he was not sure of which subjects to take or what course he wanted to do in university. Eventually, he chose History because he was quite good at it in GCSE and Media Studies because he was interested in the subject. He picked Politics after going to a 'trial class' and enjoyed it. Achieving an A in AS Media Studies was a great motivator for him because it gave him a goal to study Media Studies at university. He received an offer from a post-1992 university with a condition of 260 UCAS points, which he calculated as equivalent to a B and two Cs, something he felt he could probably manage.

> *Media is like what I'm interested in, and I guess it's also my ability because I got an A last year. Since I don't know anything else that I wanted to do, so I thought I might as well go with something I'm possibly good at. (Aaron:1:11)*

Aaron appeared to be uncertain about a lot of things, including his academic ability, interest and goal in education. Yet, he did not seem to be keen to find information which could have helped him 'know better' or make decisions. For instance, he did not know the answers to the number of times or units students were allowed to resit on the questionnaire and talked about how he made assumptions about resits rather than establishing facts.

> *Obviously the teachers tell you this is going to be the last chance to retake it, so.. I knew that, but apart from that I don't really know much else about the rules but I kind of figure that out…. I heard people that you can only resit once. Can you only retake it once? (Aaron:1:16,17)*

He was resitting AS History and AS Politics to try to get a C in both of them, adding that C was his likely limit as he was predicted a C in History and a D in Politics. He came across as rather negative about his own capability or competence.

> *There wasn't much strength in the exam, because, I don't know, I sort of fluffed it. My timing was quite out, like you have to answer a couple of questions and I answered one too long and less time for the other. (Aaron:1:66)*

Contrary to the general questionnaire findings that students found it easy to decide, Aaron found the resit decision process quite difficult, particularly about it being a hard decision and that he wished he did not have to make the decision (both rated 5 out of 5 on the questionnaire). He said his teachers did not give him much advice and more or less left the resit decision to him. The way he described the meeting with his teachers was rather dismal.

> *They didn't really give me that much help whether or not I should resit. They sort of left that more up to me and then I guess I had already made up my mind when I got my marks back; they were really low. I suppose they didn't really think there's any point trying to dissuade me…. They didn't really know what to say, but it wasn't like we had a massive meeting and they told me that it was alright. (Aaron:1:48,49)*

He said that he did poorly in the examinations in Year 12 not because he took a lax attitude, but because he found the study quite hard going. He dreaded having to resit the units again but was slightly optimistic; he felt he had learned more and was more focused in Year 13.

> *I just don't really like exams but I'm feeling kind of confident, I think I can do slightly better because, I don't know, I feel like I've learned more…. I'm kind of used to the work like A levels sort of thing…. I'm thinking about university and you kind of have to be mature about work because obviously it will be quite tough. (Aaron:1:103,105)*

In terms of interests outside college, Aaron said he liked to 'hang around' with his friends and occasionally played football with them. When asked about the significance of the extracurricular activities, the only answer he could offer was that it was good to have something outside college life.

> *If you have just your college life and nothing else, it's not, I don't know, it's not very good. (Aaron:1:92)*

In the second interview, Aaron told me that he found the examination questions quite hard and he did not do particularly well in the resit. We talked about how he prepared for the resit, how he learned in class and how college life had been for him so far. He

did not get much help from his teachers in resit preparation because the teachers always seemed busy and he did not feel like asking for extra help. He said he had difficulty writing essays and timing was his major problem, yet he only did essay plans in revision rather than actually writing some and never timed his answers. He did, however, do quite a few past questions because he wanted to know 'what the examiners looked for'.

> *You can see what the examiners like and.. you have to know what is going to come up and how to answer each question. (Aaron:2:22).*

He revised largely on his own and was disappointed when the questions he revised for did not come up in the examination.

Aaron's lack of confidence in learning was quite clear when he told me how he always stayed quiet in class and preferred to copy what the teacher wrote on the board and listen to the others in class discussions.

> *Discussions are quite helpful but I like copying down from the board…. If they ask me a question, I'll answer it. But I don't generally participate at all. I keep quiet…. I don't really like talking in front of people. Generally, teachers don't ask me to talk at all, I don't do it. (Aaron:2:42-45)*

My impression was that Aaron did not have a clear vision of what he could or needed to do to improve his performance, whether in the classroom or in examinations. He either did not bother to find out how to or he lacked the confidence to ask. Whatever it was, he clearly did not have a well thought-out plan as to how to approach the resit. I was, therefore, not too surprised to learn later that he got lower marks in the resit with the same grades, an E in History and a D in Politics.

In the third interview, we talked about what he had learned from the resit experience, how he viewed sixth-form education as a whole and what he would focus on in the remaining months of Year 13. The sense of failure or fear of it prevailed in both his reflection and his outlook. He was not sure he could improve in another resit attempt and had, therefore, decided to focus on the A2 units, which was 'sort of agreed to' by his teachers.

> *I guess it was kind of failing again, they were the worries …. Pretty disappointed actually because I worked really hard, trying to get it. I don't know, but then I kind of think maybe I should just try harder at the A2 now and get better. (Aaron:3:29-34)*

> *It's quite an important time for me like, especially these exams, because some of them centre around you for the rest of your life, so it puts a lot of pressure on you. (Aaron:3:84)*

The most negative impression I had of Aaron was his muddled logic and lack of analytical skills and independent thinking. An example of his 'confused' views about the modular system in sixth-form education is shown in the interview exchange given in ***Appendix 19***. He clearly did not understand the rationale behind the modular system, such as the advantages of intermediate goals and feedback. His view of resits was simply that they gave him another 'go' at the examination and what he should do to improve his performance was never mentioned; it probably did not occur to him and the lack of advice from his teachers did not help either.

> *Resits didn't really help me that much. It hasn't made that much of a difference, but I guess if I had done better, then it would have helped me, and so, it's a good system that you can resit. (Aaron:3:85)*

After the third interview, I did not hear from Aaron anymore. I emailed him in late August to ask him about his results and his plans. Despite having agreed at the last interview to update me when the A-level results were out, he never replied to my email.

8.3.3 Jack, who made full use of the resit system

Jack was a student at the Independent College, which has an 'early examination' policy. He was roughly in the middle academically among those interviewed, with 2As and 6Bs in GCSE. For AS levels, he got a B in History and Physical Education and a C in Business Studies. He knew the resit system well, having resat some units in Year 12 and answered all four questions about resits on the questionnaire correctly. He was resitting four AS examinations in January in Year 13: two units in Business Studies, one unit in PE and one unit in History, because they were all Cs and he needed to improve his grades.

At the first interview, Jack struck me as polite, open and confident. He said his real passion was golf (and he is quite good at it, with a handicap of four) but he recognized the significance of a university degree and decided to do A levels.

> *I had considered doing like a BTEC golf course but then sixth-form is such a great opportunity and obviously it helps you get into uni…. If you get better grades you get to go to better uni and then you get recognized by big companies and you get to work in better places and that brings wealth and stuff. (Jack:1:1,79)*

The resit decision was very easy for Jack. His reason for resitting was that he had a rather lax attitude in Year 12, playing golf instead of revising and hence performed poorly in the earlier examinations. He recognized the need to catch up and said he needed both examinations in Year 13 as resitting all the AS units in January, which he wanted to do, was unrealistic because he also had some A2 examinations at the same time.

> *Last year in January I did very badly in everything. I mean my priority then was just a bit off. And then the summer was just awful. It's a wake-up call. I have to sacrifice, do the right stuff…. I'm going to work harder in January so I just want to get it done. And if I do badly, I'll most likely resit again in June (Jack:1:36-44)*

Jack told me he wanted to follow his father into business later in life. He was one of the few students who were aware of the importance of other aspects of education outside A levels. He said he wanted to make use of the opportunities offered in sixth-form education to improve his social, physical and personal skills.

> *Here, you get to meet loads of friends and get to know social skills, and then I'm like the House prefect, that shows leadership. I've done Duke of Edinburgh and stuff.. that's what I'm going to get out of sixth-form, loads of sports as well. (Jack:1:9)*

> *If you just spend all your time sitting in a corner, put your head in a book, then you won't get any social skills. Exam grades aren't everything because you need to have some sort of personality about you. Especially if I get to work in business, if you have no personality, you won't go very far. (Jack:1:81)*

Being very active in college, Jack got along well with his teachers and fellow students. He said that the expectations of their teachers were high but the pressure to do well came more from personal motivation than from his peers or teachers.

> *I don't really feel any ((pressure from others)) but then if I do bad, I feel embarrassed and I don't want that feeling. That's probably the main bit of pressure. They don't mock you for doing bad. (Jack:1:23)*

In the second interview, Jack told me that he had worked hard on the resit preparation and was happy with his examination performance. In revision, he mainly practised examination skills, did past papers and studied the marking schemes.

> *Before it didn't bother me when I resat. It probably will this time because I've worked so hard but the other times, I've got no one else to blame but me. (Jack:2:60,100)*

> *I was more familiar, knew what to write. For History, I just practised the essay and for PE, I learned the marking scheme…. Well, you've got taught it last year but you kind of click in your own head now. (Jack:2:14,15)*

Jack said that Year 13 had been hard work and talked about things he would have changed if he had the chance to start sixth-form again. He regretted choosing History as a subject because he did not enjoy half of the topics in the syllabus and had struggled just to complete the examinations the best he could, but said he would persevere and do it. More importantly, he regretted not working harder in Year 12 and wished that he had not left himself 'with this burden'. Nevertheless, he was confident about the four resits in January because of the work he put in.

It therefore came as no surprise when Jack told me in the third interview that he had scored As in all the resits. He said that taking examinations was a good motivator for him because otherwise he might not have bothered with revision as much as he had done. He was happy that he had a chance to resit and attributed the success to the help of his teachers and his own hard work.

> *I don't mind exams because it's under pressure, so I'll be revising if there're like deadlines…. I managed to improve, I would say, is more to do with the teachers than just the fact that you can redo A levels. (Jack:3:61,85)*

It was just as well Jack did not mind taking examinations. He had already resat some units in June in Year 12, and had resat four of them for the third time in January in Year 13. He also planned to resit more examinations later in June, including two AS units which he did not do in January and another three A2 units he sat for the first time in January. He must be among the few students with a very high number of resits,

including multiple resits. On reflecting over his sixth-form experience, Jack felt that he had learned and done a lot in the two years but said it had been hard work doing the resits in Year 13. Hard work was clearly the main theme in Jack's vision of his year in Year 13; 'worked harder' or a similar phrase was featured a total of 31 times in his interviews.

> *Even though I've got better grades in the resit, if you just get it out of the way the first time, it would have been a lot easier.… Like, instead of having seven exams now, I would have two exams. (Jack:3:95,100)*

After the results were out, Jack emailed me to say that he got ABB, not good enough for his top choice but got into his second choice, a well-established research-led university. True to his vision of himself as a future businessman, he also commented that, because of the costly loans in university education, he might need to weigh up the returns "between going to university for the next four years and building myself a better base by starting work straightaway". That comment was made in 2009 and I could not help thinking that, with the current government's move of lifting the cap on tuition fees, Jack's argument for bypassing university may well find more supporters today.

8.3.4 Michelle, who resat not for necessity but for luck

Michelle was another student from the Independent College. She had good examination results, with 4A* and 5A in GCSE. She took AS History, Psychology, Biology and Dance (dropping Dance in Year 13), and scored As in all of them by the end of Year 12, some of which were achieved through resits in June. Her reason for continuing into sixth-form was that she wanted to go to university.

Despite having resat in Year 12 and an elder sister who did A levels recently, Michelle's knowledge of resits was weak, answering only two out of the four questions on the questionnaire correctly. She said she knew about resit opportunities but did not know any details, and she made decisions based on her teachers' advice. She described herself as hardworking and considered studying hard to get good grades as the main purpose of sixth-form education.

Having already done very well in AS Psychology and AS Biology, she was resitting only one unit of AS History in January in Year 13. She said the decision was not easy. She had already sat that unit twice in Year 12; she scored a B in January because the teaching was rushed and she was 'not ready', and an A when she resat it in June. She told me that if her result was below A, the decision would have been straightforward because her teacher would have expected her to resit. With an A, she could consider other factors, such as revision workload and the effect on A2, but still decided to resit it because it was 'a low A' and her teacher advised her to get as many marks as possible at AS.

Michelle said that she had found A2 much harder than AS, and the first term in Year 13 was stressful due to the workload. She wanted to study Psychology in university and got four offers, three with conditions of AAB and the fourth, BBB. She was confident only to get ABB (A in Psychology) and had, therefore, chosen the fourth one as her second choice.

She participated actively in dancing performances in college. She also did some charity work organized by the college. She believed that universities took into account extracurricular activities (although not as much as grades, she emphasized) because that's what her college advised them to write about in their UCAS applications, so 'they must be important'.

Despite her good examination results, Michelle did not seem to have much confidence with her academic ability. She often quoted 'lucky' or 'unlucky' as a reason for scoring well or not well in examinations, as shown by what she said in the first and second interviews:

> *Not so under pressure ((in the resit)). But you never know exactly what exam questions you'll get, you may be unlucky, and I haven't done that module for ages. (Michelle:1:44)*

> *Because I've done it two times before, I wasn't so worried about how to bump up the grade. I think I did okay.. I may be lucky. (Michelle:2:90)*

In the second interview, she said she did alright in the resit but was concerned about her A2 performance. She felt that having to answer two essays in A2 but not being able to resit only one of them was 'unfair'.

> *If you do well in one and do really bad in another, you can't just retake the one you did badly in; you have to retake the whole thing again. It's just annoying. So unfair. (Michelle:2:86)*

She revised for the resit largely using her own notes. She knew she could always approach her teachers for help but did not do so because she felt that since she had already taken the examination twice before, she should be fine. She practised past papers but did not use marking schemes in revising for History (but used them for the other subjects).

> *It's hard to revise using marking schemes in History. You don't really, because it's all to do with the examiner, you may be unlucky. The answers are not really definite. (Michelle:2:37)*

I found the learning style of Michelle a typical example of surface learning; she frequently talked about the need to satisfy the examination requirements and the hope of getting a 'good' examiner (not a 'harsh' one) to mark her paper. Below are her comments about learning and taking examinations in sixth-form education.

> *I'm thinking of my exam in January. If I were to do them now, without any revision, I wouldn't know it again. (Michelle:3:30)*

> *It must be so hard for the teachers. They have to just follow the guides completely. They won't be able to say more interesting things that they like to talk about and teach us, but that's what you need, that's how you get to university. They teach you so that you can perform well in the exam. (Michelle:3:31)*

It was interesting to note that when Michelle talked about teachers not being able to teach outside the syllabus, her thoughts were that it was hard for the teachers rather than it was unfortunate for the students for missing out the opportunities to learn something interesting.

Knowing that she scored a B and an A in her first two attempts, I was therefore quite taken aback when Michelle told me in the third interview that she got a C in the resit. She put it down to being 'unlucky' with her choice of question.

> *I chose the wrong question. It was a mistake, unlucky, really…. One of the questions was on Mussolini's rise to power, which was what I did before. Then there was this other question, domestic side…. I looked through a past-paper question which was really similar and I thought I'd be able to answer it well, obviously I didn't. (Michelle:3:22-26)*

I asked Michelle whether, like some grade-A students, she chose a more demanding question this time because she wanted to show off her knowledge and understanding in order to get a higher A. She said she did not.

> *I'm sure they do. I don't, I go for the easier ones (small laughs). (Michelle:3:29).*

Michelle was disappointed with the resit, not so much about the outcome because she knew the A she achieved in the previous attempt was 'safe', but because she felt she could have revised more for the two A2 units had she not taken up the resit.

> *I did revise quite a lot for the resit when I could have been revising for my A2 modules…. but luckily I did well in one of the A2 in January, I got 1A and 1C, so I am retaking the C. (Michelle:3:18,19)*

She discussed the History resit with her teacher and the decision was not to resit that unit again after working out the 'sums'.

> *We decided that I didn't need to because my UMS is high enough to get me my A, so, they said there was no need to resit. (Michelle:3:25)*

The biggest impression I had of Michelle was her dependence on her teachers, lack of independent thinking, focus on performance goals and surface approach to learning. For example, she complained about the rushed teaching in the 'early examinations' in January and put that as the reason why she got a C in one of the A2 units. Yet, because she got an A in the other, she said she did not mind them that much because she was now 'done' with that unit.

Michelle's view about 'fairness' of resits was that she did not do many resits and hence did not 'benefit' from them as much as the others who did.

> *I haven't benefited that much from resits because I haven't done hundreds and hundreds of resits, just purely because I work really hard for my exams, so luckily it paid off. (Michelle:3:43)*

Michelle emailed me later in September and told me that she got a B overall in A-level History but scored an A in both Psychology and Biology. She would be going to the university of her first choice, a 1994-group university, to read Psychology.

8.4 Learning, learner identity and social setting

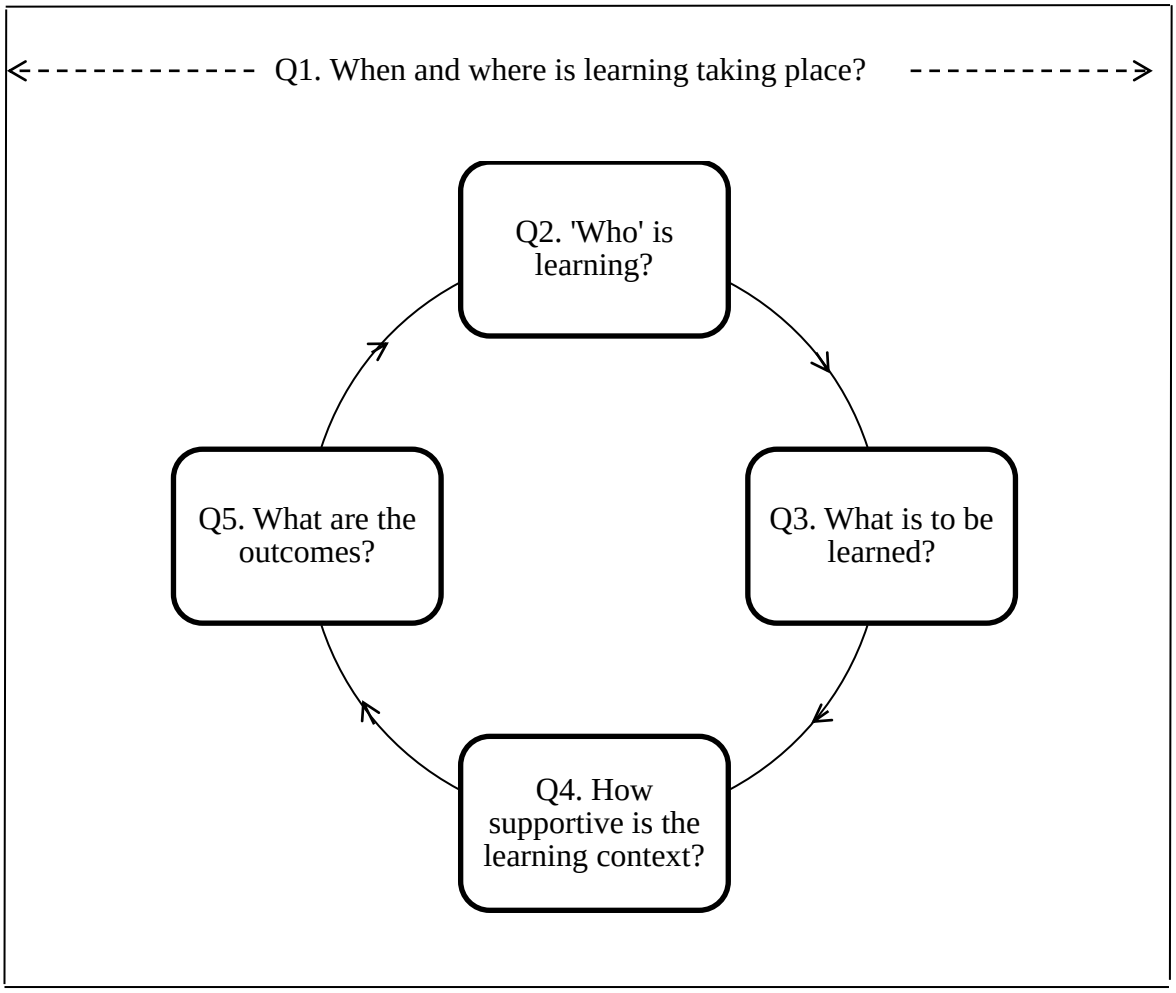
The four cases of Helen, Aaron, Jack and Michelle show how they tackled the challenge of resits in different ways. In order to understand what caused them to act the way they did and how the outcome of their actions affected their attitudes towards learning, I used the model of learning, identity and social setting used by Pollard and Filer (2001) in their research into learning and student career.

8.4.1 A simplified model of learning, identity and social setting

Although the research of Pollard and Filer was on primary school children, I found its concepts relevant, but in view of the large age difference in their research subjects and mine, I have made some modifications to the description of the student's learner identity.

There are five questions in the model. They are described below individually, including how I applied them to this research. A comparison of the four students in the case study is then made at the end with reference to the questions in the model.

Figure 8.1: A simplified model of learning, identity and social setting
Source: Pollard and Filer (2001, p. 166)



8.4.2 The five questions in the model

8.4.2.1 When and where is learning taking place?

This question addresses the socio-historical context in which the learning takes place. The same historical context is applicable to all four students. It includes the widening participation in higher education in England, the attractiveness of university education for its rewards in better career and higher wages, the modular structure and resit opportunities of A levels, and the importance of A levels for selections to university. All these help to explain the desire of the students to go further in education and the significance they attached to A-level results. The context in terms of where learning took place is analyzed by comparing the practices of the students' colleges regarding resits.

8.4.2.2 Who is learning?

This question is a reference to the key concept of students' learner identity. Instead of the emphasis on young children's sense of self as seen by the 'significant others' (e.g. parents, teachers) in Pollard and Filer's study, I focused on the students' own sense of self in terms of self-esteem, engagement with learning and willingness to exert effort in tackling learning challenges (Harlen and Crick, 2003).

8.4.2.3 What is to be learned?

This relates to the form and content of new learning challenges faced by the students. The challenges usually come in the form of academic status or achievement and, in the case of this research, refer to how the students approached the resit challenge, including their strategy in coping with the pressure of resitting, their stance on learning and preparation for the resit.

8.4.2.4 How supportive is the learning context?

This question is about classroom relationships and assistance in learning. In the context of this study, it refers to the student-teacher relationship and the level of advice and support individual students received from their teachers, particularly in resit decisions and preparation.

8.4.2.5 What are the outcomes?

There are formal and informal outcomes. Formal outcomes refer to new capabilities, attainments or standards, such as getting a better grade in the resit or improving a specific skill. Informal outcomes refer to how the students respond to the learning challenge (the resit challenge in this case), how they perceive themselves as learners in the process and how others interpret their achievement (or lack of it).

8.4.3 Comparison of the four students in the case study

The following table compares the four students in the case study with respect to the five questions in the model (the 'when' element in the first question was excluded because the historical context was the same for all four students).

Table 8.1: Comparison of the students in the model of learning, identity and social setting
Source: Pollard and Filer (2001, p.166)

	Helen	Aaron	Jack	Michelle
Where is learning taking place?				
- college - college's resit practice	• FE College • Practice (e.g. early exams, resit strategies) depends on individual subjects	• SF College • Practice (e.g. early exams, resit strategies) depends on individual subjects	• IND College • Has an 'early exam' policy and encourages resits more than the other two colleges	• IND College • Has an 'early exam' policy and encourages resits more than the other two colleges
Who is learning?				
- sense of self	• Very confident • High self-esteem • Viewed resit as a personal failure to be rectified	• Not confident at all • Low self-esteem • Viewed resit as another 'go' at the exam	• Very confident • High self-esteem • Viewed resit as a chance to 'redeem' himself	• Not very confident • Moderate self-esteem • Viewed resit as a chance to improve in case she got lucky
- engagement with learning	• Proactive • Learned with passion • Clear goal; was sure of her strengths and learned to be adaptive	• Passive • Learned to pass exams • No clear goal; did whatever he felt he could manage	• Reactive • Learned to do well in exams • Clear goal; knew about his weaknesses and what he needed to do to improve	• Reactive • Learned to do well in exams • Uncertain about her goals; relied quite heavily on others' advice
- willingness to exert effort to tackle challenges in learning	• Strong • Changed class when she felt that she was not stretched by the old teacher	• Low • Complained about the study being hard but did nothing to improve the situation	• Strong • Admitted taking a lax attitude in Year 12 but worked hard in Year 13	• Medium • A half-hearted approach to the resit, with no clear idea of what to do apart from more revision
What is to be learned?				
- new challenge (strategies, stance)	• To resit AS History to try to get an A • To improve the result in the resit by learning to address the exam requirement	• To resit two ASs to try to get a C in both • To improve the result in the resit but without knowing how to	• To resit 3 ASs to get grades higher than Cs. • To improve in the resit by working harder in revision, with support from the teachers	• To resit AS History to try to get a higher A • To improve the exam marks by hoping to be lucky with the exam
- implications	• Seen by teacher as 'above exam' and learned to write within the question's requirements	• Remained unsure of what he needed to do by not tackling the problems head on (e.g. timing issues)	• Learned the subjects better through lots of revision and exam practice	• No change to her approach to learning; studying hard but leaving it to chance in terms of doing better or worse in the exam

How supportive is the learning context?				
- Relationship with teacher	• A good relationship, taking in the teacher's advice but also in control of her own learning	• A somewhat indifferent relationship, did not get much advice but did not ask for help either	• A good relationship, working with his teachers to try to improve in the exam	• A good relationship but relied heavily on her teachers for information and advice
- Preparation for the resit	• Good support	• Very little support	• Good support	• Not much support (did not ask for help)
What are the outcomes?				
- formal outcome	• Improved (eventually) in the resit • Learned how to meet exam requirements	• No improvement • Did not learn anything new in the process	• Improved significantly in the resit (all As) • Acquired better knowledge and skills	• Did much worse, from an A to a C • Did not learn anything new in the process
- informal outcome	• Responded positively to the challenge • Success was the result of joint effort by both teacher and student • Strengthened self-esteem and self-efficacy	• Responded negatively to the challenge • Not much input from teacher and the failure was faced by student alone • Self-esteem and self-efficacy remained low	• Responded positively to the challenge • Success was the result of joint effort by both teacher and student • Strengthened self-esteem and self-efficacy	• Responded half-heartedly to the challenge • Blamed the failure on being unlucky with the question in the resit • Self-esteem and self-efficacy remained moderate

According to Pollard and Filer, the informal outcomes of new challenges are more significant than the formal outcomes in the formation of the students' learner identity.

8.5 Learner identity

Pollard and Filer highlight three elements in the construction of learner identity: academic identity, extracurricular identity and social identity.

8.5.1 Academic identity

Academically, Helen seemed naturally confident because of her intelligence and past record of academic success. Jack might not have done as well academically but was equally confident, as demonstrated by his ability to recognize his shortcomings and then do something about them. On the other hand, Aaron sounded very negative throughout the interviews, during which he talked often of his weaknesses but never about

solutions. Despite her good examination results, Michelle did not seem to be very confident with her academic ability and merely stressed her diligence.

According to Dweck and Leggett's (1988) social-cognitive model of achievement motivation, students' goals and values tend to guide their approaches to the task or challenge at hand, which influence their cognition and affect. In terms of achievement goals, Helen exhibited a strong emphasis on learning goals but recognized also, after some guidance by her teacher, the importance of meeting the performance requirements of the examination (Heyman and Dweck, 1992). The other three students were much more performance-goal oriented. Dweck and Leggett suggest that a strong emphasis on performance goals create vulnerability to a 'helpless' motivational reaction, in which failure implies low ability so that challenges that could potentially reveal inadequate ability are avoided, and the occurrence of failure often leads to demotivation. This was demonstrated in the case of Aaron's 'helplessness' and, to a certain extent, Michelle's excuses in her reaction to the poor resit result. In the case of Jack, his belief that ability is malleable helped him tackle the resit challenge with dedicated effort and persistence. For example, his approach towards A-level History, a subject he wished he had dropped in Year 13, can be described as 'introjected regulation' (Deci and Ryan, 1985), in that he was motivated by the recognition that the examination needed to be satisfactorily completed even though he did not value it personally.

According to Harlen and Crick (2003), students who attribute failure to lack of ability, which they perceive as a stable and uncontrollable quality (as in the case of Aaron and, to a certain extent, Michelle) are more likely to respond negatively to summative assessment than those who attribute success to effort and perceive ability as changeable and controllable (as in the case of Helen and Jack). Students in the latter group are more likely to deal with failure constructively and to persevere with the learning task at hand than the former group. This is because personal attributes, such as self-esteem, effort and expectations, all contribute to the students' sense of efficacy in learning and their capacity to learn and continue to learn.

8.5.2 Extracurricular identity

Both Helen and Jack had interests outside college work, Helen with her orchestral activities and Jack with his golfing. Aaron did not have a specific interest outside

college except playing football occasionally with his friends. Michelle's activities seemed to be restricted only to those organized by her college rather than out of her own interest. Greeno, Pearson and Schoenfeld (1999) point out that the sense of self forms an important part in one's self-perception or identity as membership of a community (e.g. a sports team or an orchestra), which entails a certain kind of self-confidence, competence and feelings of entitlement and empowerment. Helen and Jack saw their contributions to, and gains from, the activities they pursued in a positive light. There did not seem to be much engagement in extracurricular activities by Aaron, who saw occasionally playing football as 'just something to do outside college', while Michelle's participation in these activities was largely because her college said they were important for university applications.

8.5.3 Social identity

Socially, Jack appeared to be the most confident among the four with his sports and social activities in college. He talked about the value of leadership and keeping good social contacts. My impression of Helen was that she was 'proud' (as how she often described herself in the interviews) or even 'a bit arrogant'. Michelle did not talk much about socializing but stressed the importance of focusing on working hard at college. Aaron said he liked to hang out with his friends but did not seem to see beyond the importance of social interaction other than 'just something to do'. According to Greeno, Pearson and Schoenfeld (1999), social interactions and other external conditions, such as engaged participation and practices involving others in a group, can influence an individual's performance in the acquisition of knowledge. Hence, Aaron's avoidance of active participation in class discussions (and thus losing good learning opportunities) was perhaps not so much to do with his worries about not knowing enough to contribute, but a result of his lack of social skills; the two tend to influence each other.

Social identity is also concerned with the students' relationships with their teachers and parents (Pollard and Filer, 2001). Helen said she had a good relationship with her History teacher and both had mutual respect for each other. Unlike Aaron, who said he had very little support from his teachers and did not ask them for help, Jack attributed his improvement to the guidance and advice of his teachers. Although Michelle knew

that she could always approach her teachers and generally relied on them for advice and support, she did not ask for help in preparation for the resit because she assumed that she would be fine, having sat the unit twice before. One noteworthy feature of sixth-form education is that the 'power relationship' between students and teachers (see for example, Torrance and Pryor, 1998) is different from that which the students experienced in GCSE or before. Teachers no longer constantly direct instructions at the students but encourage them to work more independently. The power of control has shifted somewhat from teachers to students. In situations like resits, which are optional and outside the teachers' normal duties, students who proactively approach their teachers for help seemed likely to get more assistance.

Both parents of Helen went to university while neither parent of Aaron, Jack or Michelle did. All four students told me that they had very supportive parents, as indicated in their comments below:

> *They trust me a lot because I know my education. If I ask them for help, they'll give it but they said you obviously know and your teachers know more than we do, so just do what you can. (Helen:1:51)*
>
> *They do ask how I get on in college. They're very supportive and offer to if I need some help, if I want them to talk to the teacher or something, they're always up to it…. They just think what I want to do will be what I need to do. (Aaron:2:72)*
>
> *They said make sure that you do better, because like if you're going to do a lot worse, what's the point of shelling out 30 pounds or so? Yes I think they're supportive generally. They just tell me to work harder. (Jack:1:19,20)*
>
> *I think I'm lucky because they're not pushy at all. My older sister is in university, she gives me a lot of advice. My dad helped me with my personal statement…. Yes, if I ask any of them to help, they would give it to me. (Michelle:1:96-99)*

The interesting difference in the above comments is that Helen mentioned trust, Jack mentioned money, Michelle mentioned help and Aaron mentioned his parents' offer to talk to his teachers if needed. Obviously without other backing data, the meaning of these comments depends on one's interpretation and my interpretation is that, in a way, they reflected Helen's confidence and the value she placed on her independence, Jack's utilitarian views, Michelle's reliance on others for advice and help, and Aaron's underlying concern of not being able to communicate well with his teachers.

8.5.4 Comparison between the four students

Helen's learner identity was shaped mostly by her academic attainment which was reflected in her high self-esteem and independence. My impression was that, while Helen might have learned the significance of multiple goals (Heyman and Dweck, 1992) from her resit experience, it was unlikely that she would forsake deep learning in favour of surface learning in future learning career. Although she also got good examination grades, Michelle lacked the confidence and passion for learning like Helen had, viewing 'luck' and hard work as the main reason for success. Her lack of independent thinking and reliance on others for advice and support was dominant in her learner identity and this might affect her learning career in higher education. Jack came across as very confident, formed probably more from his strong extracurricular and social identity than from his academic identity. His learning attitude was unlikely to deviate much from a strong 'utilitarian' focus on performance goals and extrinsic rewards (Deci et al., 2004). In contrast, second chances which had helped Jack were of little use to Aaron, who was weak in all three elements of learner identity. Without appropriate support and help from teachers and others, Aaron did not know how to tackle resits positively and his weak self-esteem, low self-efficacy and unclear goals would unlikely enable him to tackle challenges effectively in his future learning career.

8.6 Learner identity and learning career

8.6.1 Relationship between students' learner identity and learning career

Pollard and Filer suggest that students' achievement in a task is often dependent on their learner identity or how they approach the challenge of that task, and the consequence of how the achievement is construed by others (e.g. teachers, parents) is that it affects the social status, self-esteem and perception of the students as learners. This influence then rolls round to contribute once more to the issue of the students' learner identity. In other words, it becomes an iterative process, with the students' learner identity shaping how they tackle future challenges in their learning career. According to Ecclestone and Pryor (2003), students' attitudes, dispositions and decision-making are part of the formation of their learner identity as they progress through formal learning programmes. Using case studies involving students in GNVQ assessment, Ecclestone (2004) shows how the assessment regime, external conditions and individual agency

interact to shape students' learning dispositions, with students investing old habitus in new strategies or developing new habitus in changed social settings in order to achieve good grades. The way students behave, as argued by Ecclestone, can be explained to a certain extent by Bourdieu's (1986) concept of habitus, capital and field.

8.6.2 Bourdieu's concept of habitus, capital and field

Bourdieu used the concept of habitus, capital and field as a way to reconcile social structure with individual agency in the study of social science (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990; Delanty and Strydom, 2003; Grenfell, 2008; Maton, 2008). While Durkheim emphasized the external, objective controls on human action and Weber stressed the subjective foundation of motivation as the cause behind human action, Bourdieu focused on practices that mediate between objective structures and the intentional activity of action which, he suggested, are grounded in the 'habitus'. Habitus is related to the idea of habit but differs from it in one important aspect: it has a historical link to each individual and implies something which has become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions (Maton, 2008). Habitus is structured by conditions of existence (way of being, habitual state, predisposition and propensity) and, at the same time, generates practices, beliefs, perceptions and feelings. It is structured by the field (the social spaces or ongoing contexts in which we live) as well as being the basis for our understanding of our lives:

> On one side, it is a relation of *conditioning*: the field structures the habitus…. On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or *cognitive construction*. Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world.
>
> Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p.127, original emphasis)

For Bourdieu, social life is constantly pervaded by struggles over social recognition, which arise in response to social inequality, and in these struggles, social agents adopt differing strategies to maintain or improve their position in the field or social spaces, by striving to augment the power they derive from various forms of capital: economic, social, cultural and symbolic (Delanty and Strydom, 2003; Thomson, 2008). According to Ecclestone and Pryor (2003), cultural capital in education comprises individuals' knowledge of how to 'play the system', the result of which can be the basis for social and cultural exclusion or for differential achievement within and between learning

programmes, while social capital refers to the actual or potential resources individuals may benefit from establishing social networks and social relations. The formation of habitus starts within the family (the domestic habitus) but for Bourdieu, education is the most important agency, where cultural capital assumes an institutionalized form by exposing students over a prolonged period to a specialized social habitus (Moore, 2008).

8.6.3 Different cultures and practices of the three colleges

Based on entries in the reflexive journal which recorded my observation of the activities at the colleges during my visits there together with the analysis of the interview data, I will examine below how the different cultures and practices of the three colleges contributed to the shaping of the learning habitus of their students.

8.6.3.1 The Independent College

The Independent College impressed me as an educational institution where the students receive strong pastoral care and academic support. It organizes many leadership-training programmes, extracurricular activities and charity work for its sixth-form students. While some, like Jack, saw the significance of these activities in establishing the cultural and social capital (in terms of getting qualifications, acquiring life skills and building up social networks), which is probably what the college has intended, others like Michelle only participated in them because the college told them they were valuable for university applications[18]. During my visits, the students I saw around the large campus always seemed polite and there was an air of 'discipline'; both staff and students were dressed impeccably in tailored suits and some teachers wore academic gowns in class. The college has a good examination record and is within the top 10 per cent in the A levels league table.

As discussed in the case-study analysis earlier, both Jack and Michelle exhibited a learning disposition with a strong inclination towards performance goals. This was not surprising given the intense examination-focus culture of the Independent College, which came across very strongly in the interview of its college manager (head of sixth-

[18] While the college constitutes a structured arena (the field), the structures are not fixed as they are mediated by the teachers, constituted by the practices of the students and developed through interactions between teachers and students and between students (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Pryor and Torrance, 2000).

form), who told me that the position of the college was to have an 'early examination' policy so as to maximize the chance of resits in order for the students to get the best possible A levels. The college used past papers in teaching (not so much as to 'drill' the students, the head of sixth-form emphasized, but to show the students where the taught material fits into the examination) and ran special clinics (fee-charging) to prepare students for A levels. It tolerated the consequential disruption to classes from resits as a 'sacrifice'. Although the questionnaire findings suggest a resit pattern of 84 per cent, it was clear from the interviews that the resit situation was much more serious throughout the two years of sixth-form and multiple resits were commonplace; the students interviewed all said that they had already resat several AS units in Year 12. The overall focus of the college was on examination success which, as emphasized by the head of sixth-form, was the expectations of the students' parents.

It was fairly clear from the interviews that the instrumental strategy for the students was for getting through the system to get good A levels in order to go to the best possible university of their choice. This was integral to the formation of the students' 'utilitarian' habitus, not only for Jack and Michelle, but also for the other four students interviewed there. The result was that, while most managed examination success at A levels according to (or even above) their expectation, their learning was extrinsically motivated and they largely adopted a surface approach to learning. The way the students talked about how they learned in college suggested that they generally lacked independent and critical thinking skills and the desire for deep learning; examples can be found in Michelle's talking about their teachers having to limit the teaching to what was required in the examination, Jack's talking about how the teachers spent a lot of time telling them what they should do in examinations instead of teaching the subject and Kenneth's description of his understanding of how one learns under the modular resit system ('learning to forget').

8.6.3.2 The Sixth-Form College

Even though the Sixth-Form College is within the top 30 per cent in the A levels league table, none of the four students interviewed there performed particularly well in the examination. Apart from Aaron, another student, Cathy, also showed signs of low self-esteem and inability to cope with examination pressure; she left the college in March, probably due to poor results in the January examinations. Of the other two

students, Doris was the one with the best examination results; she had 2A* and 6As in GCSE and eventually scored 4Bs in A levels. Brian had average GCSE and AS results and got a B and two Cs in A levels. Both were admitted to universities of their second choice.

The impression I had of the Sixth-Form College was one of 'chaotic energy'. The college always seemed to be buzzing with activities but there was also a sense of lack of good coordination and calmness, which was present in the Independent College. The campus is reasonably large but the buildings are fairly crowded with little open space. During my visits, there was always a constant flow of people, both staff and students, in the narrow corridors and sometimes talking in the middle of them. The assistant principal was the coordinator of my project. She was helpful in terms of overseeing the questionnaire exercise (not very successfully, however, with a rather poor return), agreeing to the interview (very forthcoming on some topics but slightly cautious on others) and helping with room bookings (arranged by her assistant, with some difficulties several times).

According to the questionnaire survey, the college had the lowest resit statistics (albeit still high, at 77%) amongst the three colleges involved in the study. The college manager (the assistant principal) and the teacher there both stressed that decisions to resit were entirely up to the students, with advice from their teachers. Based on the findings of the students' interviews, the college did not seem to cater to the specific needs of individual students well, particularly those with poor AS results. Doris was the only one happy with the advice and support from her teachers; the other three all said that they would prefer more help and support but did not pursue it because 'the teachers were always busy' (this could also be an issue of limited resources). The focus on examination grades was nevertheless strong, as evident by the teacher's comments about the need for teachers to teach to the examination due to accountability implications (i.e. individual subject departments and teachers needed good results for their subjects; this could also be a reason why more efforts and support might have been focused on students with good examination results, but this was not made explicit at the interview) and by the heavy focus of the students on using past papers and marking schemes in their study, not to mention the dubious revision tactics adopted by Aaron

and Brian as quoted earlier in the thesis. None of the students interviewed talked actively or passionately about participating in sports and extracurricular activities at the college.

8.6.3.3 The FE College

Despite being the lowest of the three colleges in terms of examination results (only in the top 60% in the A levels league table), the FE College impressed me most with its learning environment and the attitudes of the staff and students. The student manager was my coordinator; he was helpful and resourceful. The college has a fairly large campus which looks well planned. During my visits, the students I saw dressed casually but neatly and they moved around the campus with an ease and order which seemed to be lacking in the Sixth-Form College but without the 'formal' air at the Independent College. Although I arranged the interviews with the students directly, the students' form tutors were always accessible by telephone or email if I needed help.

There was the presence of a good supportive learning climate in the college. I interviewed the students in the meeting/study rooms in the college's 'learning centre', which is their library cum IT centre. It was always full of students, reading or working on computers, and the atmosphere was fairly similar to a university library, albeit much smaller in size. The students interviewed talked about using the intranet and internet services provided by the college for research, such as finding additional reading materials for their subjects or looking up information about social and sports activities in the college. They all participated actively in extracurricular activities and said they enjoyed the sports competitions and musical performances. The college manager (a form tutor) and the teacher interviewed there both talked about flexibility in the college, such as having different policies on when to enter students for examinations to suit different subjects' needs or allowing students to change class in A2. Nevertheless, the resit culture was strong; 98 per cent of the students in the questionnaire survey indicated that they were resitting. Even though the interview findings suggest that most of the students resat only in Year 13, the resit statistics were still extremely high.

Helen and another student, Edward, were students with good examination results and both showed a passion for learning; they were the only two amongst all fourteen students interviewed who talked about learning in order to master knowledge and

competence rather than learning solely for examination success. Of the other two students from the FE College, Frank had fairly low AS results (he was predicted Cs) in Year 12; he eventually got a B, a C and a D in A levels. Unlike Aaron from the Sixth-Form College, however, Frank was confident and outgoing; he scored an A in one of the AS resits in January through revision and better understanding of the subject, he said. He knew he was not academically strong but got on well in college and was respected for his enthusiasm and strengths in sports (he was captain of the college's rugby team). The other student, George, was average at GCSE but managed to do very well in the AS resits through efforts in revision and got good A-level results overall (an A and two Bs). Apart from Frank who decided to travel overseas after A levels, the other three all managed to go to universities of their first-choice.

8.6.4 College as an agency shaping students' learner identity

On the surface, the Independent College was the most successful of the three colleges; its students got good A-level grades and participated actively in extracurricular activities. Some research, however, has shown that while attending independent schools helps to raise attainment at A levels because these schools tend to have better resources and are much more focused on preparing students for university entrance, students from independent schools are found to be less likely to achieve a university degree of a higher class than those coming from state schools (Smith and Naylor, 2005; Hoare and Johnston, 2011). A possible explanation for this, using the Independent College in this study as an example, could be that the students have been coached intensively throughout the sixth-form course, thus lacking the independent and critical thinking skills desirable in higher education. As shown in the cases of Michelle and Jack, the students were taught to perform to meet examination requirements. The focus on performance goals produced a serious deficit in the students' approach to learning: adopting a surface approach rather than deep learning.

In the case of the Sixth-Form College, the emphasis was also on examination success but this seemed to consist of focusing its resources more on those students with good examination results and the individual needs of those with poor results might be less well catered for, as shown by the inadequate support given to Aaron and Cathy, and to a certain extent, Brian. As pointed out by Harlen and Crick (2003), students with low

self-esteem (typically those with poor academic performance) need a constructive learning environment, where the teachers or supervisors could help them develop better self-assessment skills, devise more explicit learning goals and direct effort more effectively and appropriately in learning and task handling. All this seemed to be provided rather inadequately or differentially to different students at the Sixth-Form College; in Aaron's case, the resit experience had likely weakened his self-esteem and negatively affected his learner identity.

The status of the FE College was perhaps not so much based on examination results but more on the cultural and social capital in the form of an autonomous learning environment with good support and facilities. Despite its mediocre examination record, it attracted students with academic success like Helen (this could be due to Helen's parents, being both university graduates, having the 'cultural' habitus of seeing the significance of an all-round education). It was satisfying to see how Helen was motivated by her teacher who reassured her that it was not her lack of subject knowledge or writing skills that failed her but the examination, which called for a lower level of analysis. As pointed out by Torrance and Pryor (1998) in their study of the relationship between teaching, learning and assessment, it is important for teachers to communicate to their students that they are interested in them as people and not just their test performance. Students with poor examination results like Frank seemed also to be well looked after by the college and managed to improve in the resit and maintain good self-confidence.

It is acknowledged that the analysis above was based on limited data and that the findings refer to individual colleges and are not purported to be typical of the college type they represent. It is also necessary to point out that, based on the descriptions of the students interviewed of how they learned and revised for A levels, a heavy examination culture was present in all three colleges, albeit to different degrees. However, there seemed to be a significant difference in terms of how the different colleges made use of the resit system to their advantage. Bourdieu's (1986, 1990) concept of habitus, capital and field discussed earlier talks about how those in positions of domination are able to maintain their position and how their habitus enables them to know and exploit the rules of the game in the field and to gain from them. Bourdieu

pointed out that changes in the field usually occur in ways that are advantageous to those who are dominant and, even when not, their capital enables them to adapt so that they maintain field position. The findings of this study suggest that students who attend schools in the independent sector, such as those at the Independent College, are advantaged because the structures, resources and practices of their college seem better able to allow them to exploit the A levels' resit system. The college manager of the Independent College said that the college valued very strongly the significance of good examination results (it was what the parents wanted). The attitude seemed to be that since resit opportunities were available, it might as well make full use of the system to its advantage. The college's focus on examination success could be interpreted as its aim to strengthen its cultural, economic and social capital, including a high position in the league table, good reputation, favourable choice for parents and ability to charge high fees. Although its practice was likely to enhance negative learning dispositions in its students and instill a new habitus in them in the form of a second-chance mentality, which might not be in the long-term educational interest of the students intrinsically, it did guarantee its students better chances at examination success and better university places and might explain why, despite the emphasis by the UK government on widening participation, students from the independent sector continue to populate the most prestigious universities and courses in very disproportionate ways[19].

8.7 Summary

Using a case study involving four students, I have examined how students of differing learning dispositions handled the challenge of resits by comparing their personal qualities, learning strategies and social relationships. The findings suggest that students with high self-esteem and high self-efficacy tend to handle failure more positively and they face the challenge of resits through a process of cause identification (reason for the low performance in the first place), soliciting help (talking to their teachers) and making an effort to achieve the desired outcome (motivation and a belief in ability being malleable). In contrast, students with low self-esteem and low self-efficacy are more likely to face failure negatively and treat resits as another chance to have a 'go' at the

[19] As reported in the Times on 25 April 2011, of the students accepted by the University of Cambridge in 2010, only 59 per cent were from state schools.

examination without knowing what they need to do. Instead of a chance to improve their result, the resit experience is more likely to weaken their self-confidence by the lack of clear goals and pressure of failure. The students' learning habitus is conditioned to a certain extent by their learner identity, which is shaped during their learning career through the decisions they make, their perception of themselves as learners, their social relationships and their approach to learning; the culture and practices of the students' college play a very significant role in all this. The study shows that while good examination results (which may be achieved through resits) may bring the students immediate gains (as in going to university), the habitus the students acquired during sixth-form education (such as surface approach to learning and second-chance mentality) may not necessarily prepare them well for eventual success at university or for lifelong learning.

9 Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

In this final chapter, I will summarize the key findings, reflect upon the research experience and describe how this research may contribute to discussion in the education and examination community about A levels and the resit policy. But first, I want to highlight the relationship between policy, practice and research, starting with the policy of the A levels' unlimited resit rule.

9.2 The A levels' resit policy

The intention of allowing students to resit is to avoid them being unduly disadvantaged in high-stakes single-examination situations (e.g. if they were ill or there was a family tragedy). The A levels' resit policy has, however, as found by this study, produced some educationally undesirable effects on student learning when it comes to actual practice in the classroom. The situation was particularly bad with multiple resits under the unlimited resit rule. The origin of this rule dated back to 2002, when an independent inquiry into A-level standards was carried out in England following allegations that the UK government had put undue pressure on awarding bodies to depress grades at A levels (Hodgson and Spours, 2008). One recommendation of that inquiry (Tomlinson, 2002) was for the rules governing resits and the 'cashing-in' of AS units to be simplified and this was subsequently implemented by the QCA in October 2003 when it removed the resit limits in A levels.

In its implementation, the QCA seemed to have overlooked the emphasis in the inquiry report that the recommendations were made "as an interim measure, in the shorter term" (Tomlinson, 2002, para. 43) and that "implementation should take account of emerging timetables for wider 14-19 policy development" (ibid., para. 47). At that time, reviews had already begun into reforming 14-19 education and training in England, which resulted in the Tomlinson's report in 2004 (Tomlinson, 2004). As things turned out, that report was rejected by the Labour government, which opted for the development of new vocational 14-19 Diplomas instead of the unified diploma system recommended by Tomlinson (Hodgson and Spours, 2008). Another

recommendation of the Tomlinson's report for reducing the burden of external assessment derived from A levels was not taken up either. Since then, there have been little change to A levels, apart from some fine tuning, such as the introduction of A* grades in 2010. In the meantime, the unlimited resit rule remains.

The QCA did a review of the resit policy in 2007. Afterwards, it decided to continue with the unlimited resit rule. Ken Boston, then QCA Chief Executive, stated the following:

> Resits would be a problem if, in practice, they were being used to take the same exam multiple times. In fact, the number of young people who take multiple resits has remained very low. QCA has reviewed the rule that does not limit the number of A level resits. Resits provide a fair measure of candidates' attainment and are consistent with arrangements for other level 3 qualifications. For this reason the current rule will remain.
>
> Ken Boston *(*QCA, 2007b)

The argument in the above statement is flawed, in my view, for three reasons. Firstly, it assumes that multiple resits will remain low, even though the QCA review itself reports that some teachers felt that "they had no choice but to encourage their students to resit even if they did not think it was necessary" (QCA, 2007a, para.14) and that "the suggestion of reducing the number of resitting opportunities for each unit to one received strong support from the teachers and senior management team members (and even the students)" (ibid., para.19). Indeed, as reported in another recent survey (de Waal, 2009) and supported by the findings of this research, multiple resits are not as 'rare' as was reported by the QCA. Secondly, the rationale for the resit policy seems to be based on making the A levels' arrangements comparable to those of other level 3 qualifications in England (Directgov, n.d.d), whose assessment emphasis, even though they all largely use a modular approach, are quite different from A levels. Comparability between qualifications does not necessarily imply that they all have to follow the same structure (e.g. the coursework or practical elements do vary from one qualification to another). Finally, it fails to address the possible effect of multiple resits on student learning, an area not investigated in any detail in the QCA review. The QCA's decision was based on the findings of research in its review report. Research can affect policies and policies certainly influence practice. This brings me to the important issue regarding the relationship between research, policy and practice.

9.3 Research, policy and practice and the foremost task of research

9.3.1 Research, policy and practice

According to Bassey (1995), educational research is not simply about doing research in educational settings but is concerned with attempts to improve educational action through informed judgements and decisions. Research has impact when it results in action and makes people think (Levin, 2003). At his lecture to the Teacher Training Agency in 1996, David Hargreaves, former QCA chief executive, urged that education, like medicine, needs evidence about 'what works' and called for more research that is closely related to policy and practice (Hargreaves, 1996). His comments aroused much debate in the academic community (c.f. Gipps, 1997; Hammersley, 1997, 2000, 2002; Hargreaves, 1997; Elliott, 2001), with arguments ranging from what counts as 'evidence' to education and teaching goals, stakeholders' interests, government support, research funding and the purpose of educational research itself. The interaction between research, policy and practice is a frequent topic for discussion in the educational sector in England (e.g. Black, 2000; Goldstein and Woodhouse, 2000; Hammersley, 2005). The current emphasis is for social researchers to work more closely with research users and to engage in a better understanding of the different roles, needs and contributions of researchers, policymakers and practitioners in social research, as will be discussed below.

9.3.2 User and policy engagement

The importance of user engagement in social research in informing and improving public policies in England is highlighted by Rickinson, Sebba and Edwards (2011). They suggest that, instead of asking what use educational research is to potential users, the question for social researchers should be about what user engagement means for educational research. They point out that users include practitioners, policymakers as well as service users and user engagement should be regarded as the flow of knowledge between research and fields of study, either in the research process itself or with the research outputs. They stress that user engagement is valuable and desirable in social research because different users bring to the research process knowledge and expertise specific to their positions and it is the interplay between the different kinds of knowledge and expertise that will improve research relevance and quality, enhance

research use and produce the connection and impact on the wider knowledge generation processes. For practitioners, a close working relationship will help both the researchers and practitioners to expand their understanding of what is involved in teaching and how it can be developed to enhance learning. Strategies, such as making knowledge exchange a central feature of the research design, building a research study from action research projects, developing design experiments and developmental work research, help to engage practitioners in the critical examination of practices in education. For service users, the increasing personalization of public services has resulted in greater control by users. Their engagement will help increase both the relevance and impact of research. It can be in the form of involving students as researchers, engaging users of special services through reflection of their experience or involving service users in systematic reviewing. In terms of policymaking, researchers need to be aware that the relationship between research and policy is often not a linear one consisting of research providing findings for policymakers to make decisions but a complex model involving many different players in policy networks. There is also a difference in views of research evidence by researchers and policymakers. While researchers value scientific evidence, policymakers tend to view evidence in terms of relevance and timeliness. Rickinson, Sebba and Edwards point out that working with policymakers in research is not without tension but their engagement is useful and essential, such as in developing research questions and research design, verifying interpretations of emerging findings and deciding whether specific research findings will be used or considered.

In policy engagement, there is also a need to analyze the changes in the policymaking process over time and to identify areas where research works most effectively in the present policy context. According to Hodgson and Spours (2006), five major interrelated changes in the policymaking process have been instrumental in affecting today's post-compulsory education and training policies in England. They include a growth of 'arms-length' agencies (such as QCDA and Ofqual), political centralization (control and intervention by central government), the introduction of a quasi market in education (through competition between education providers and the stronger involvement of consumers), recent development in what counts as policy text (the proliferation of policy documents) and devolution (the divergence of the Scottish and Welsh education systems from England). Hodgson and Spours suggest a four-

dimensional framework in the analysis of 14-19 education policy in England, in terms of 'the political eras', 'the education state', 'the policy process' and 'the political space'. They argue that socio-economic, political, cultural, curricular, organizational and labour markets need to be analyzed in order to provide the conditions for a new political era that will help generate and promote transformative ideas and practices. The education state, which comprises a range of national, regional and local structures and institutions, needs to be studied in order to understand the interplay of different levels of governance in searching for a more open and interactive style of policymaking. There is also a need to take into account the complex set of actions and players that contribute to the policy process. Finally, political space needs to be explored to provide opportunities for different stakeholders to influence the policy process. The main argument of Hodgson and Spours is that researchers need to be able to assess when and how to intervene in the policy process in order to bring about improvements to the education system.

9.3.3 The foremost task of research

To a large extent, this research study has been conducted with practice and policymaking in mind. The focus of the research was on how A-level resits were practised by teachers and students in three colleges. I also attracted the interest of awarding bodies regarding the effectiveness and implications of the resit policy for student learning through presentations in seminars at *Cambridge Assessment* and AQA. Having discussed and acknowledged the significance between research, policy and practice, I shall now return to the main issue of the research study: its foremost task.

With reference to the post-Hargreaves debate, McIntyre (1997) argues that, rather than being judged chiefly on the basis of impact, educational research should primarily be judged on the basis of its professionalism. McIntyre stresses that the significance for educational researchers is: "of having taken all reasonable steps not only to ensure that my research conclusions were valid and potentially educationally valuable but also to make it appropriately accessible to relevant teachers or other practitioners" (ibid., p.137). Accordingly, I will reflect on the outcome of this research in three areas: production of knowledge, trustworthiness and potential value or accessibility.

9.4 Production of knowledge

The findings of this research are summarized in two parts: findings which have been covered by other research and findings in areas not researched or addressed sufficiently elsewhere. They are followed by suggestions of how I addressed the research questions.

9.4.1 What has been published in other research

Some of this research's findings confirm or concur with what has been suggested in other research. These include the culture of resitting examinations to maximize grade attainment (Hodgson and Spours, 2003; ACS, 2009), instrumentalized learning as a result of examination-driven teaching and learning (Torrance, 2007; Sadler, 2007), the benefits of students taking examinations later in the A-level course (McClune, 2001) and A levels not adequately preparing young people for higher education (Wilde and Wright, 2007).

9.4.2 Areas not researched or sufficiently addressed elsewhere

This research study has also identified several areas about A-level resits, which I consider noteworthy but have not been researched or sufficiently addressed elsewhere. They are:

- Insufficient briefing of students about resits in A levels;
- Factors contributing to students' improvement in resits;
- Lack of appreciation of the importance of a positive approach to resits;
- The significance (or insignificance) of resit fees in terms of 'fairness';
- Inappropriate use of examination documents by students in resit preparation;
- Need for more support for resitters, especially those with poor examination results;
- Resit practices and the formation of students' learning habitus;
- The changing attitudes of universities towards resit results in A levels;
- The cyclical relationship between sixth-form, A levels and university.

9.4.2.1 Insufficient briefing of students about resits in A levels

What has not been widely discussed publicly is how well students understand the resit system. Since resits are optional and are paid for by the students or their parents, one might think that it is desirable for the students to understand the objective of the resit

system and the possible effects of resits on their study before they make resit decisions. The college managers involved in the research emphasized the 'optional' nature of resits by reiterating that teachers could only advise their students the best they could and the decision whether to resit or not was eventually a matter of choice for the students; there was no mention of any detailed briefing of the students about the rationale behind the resit system. The teachers, on the other hand, were concerned that some students might take a lax attitude if they were told of resit opportunities at the start of sixth-form and so only talked about resits after the first examinations. Yet, it was clear from the questionnaire and interview findings that the students were aware of resits but most of them did not seem to have a proper understanding of the system. Many of the students interviewed did not perform their best in Year 12, not because of exceptional circumstances (e.g. illness or stress), but largely because they had underestimated the demands of A levels or they knew that they could always resit. The students' general perception was that A levels were very important in their learning career but were also very difficult, and they therefore 'should be' given a second chance. What they did not realize sufficiently, and should have been briefed on properly, was the knock-on effect of resits on their Year 13 study. As observed by one of the students interviewed, in briefing and advising the students, the college should concentrate on the two years of sixth-form rather than only the year ahead.

9.4.2.2 Factors contributing to students' improvement in resits

Contrary to the general perception that improvement in A levels through resits is due largely to students getting better at taking examinations (ACS, 2009, de Waal, 2009), this study has identified a number of factors, apart from examination techniques, which contribute to the students' improvement in resits. They include: underperforming in the first examination due to the students having a lax attitude or not being ready for the examination, feedback from the first examination, better understanding of the subject through revision, maturity in subject knowledge when learning the subject at A2 level, better generic skills through more practice, and clearer goals and greater motivation in Year 13. In other words, the improvement in some resits was down to the hard work and maturity of the students and represented better competence in the students' knowledge and skills, and this should not be undermined by the assumption that resits automatically mean better results.

9.4.2.3 Lack of appreciation of the importance of a positive approach to resits

There is very little research into the approach adopted by students towards resits in A levels. The findings of this study suggest that a proper approach to resits is by identifying the cause of the underperformance in the first examination (feedback), followed by soliciting help from teachers and others to address shortcomings (the way to move forward) and then making an effort to achieve the desired outcome (motivation and a belief in ability being malleable). However, in many cases among the students interviewed, instead of being shown a positive approach to resits, students were encouraged to dwell on elaborate resit strategies by working out the 'sums' in the make-up of the A-level grades, and then sitting and resitting examinations to meet target grades or optimize the chances for the best possible results. Consequently, some students either took a 'nothing to lose' attitude, adopted a strategic 'game-playing' approach or followed the 'herd instinct' in resitting. As a result, the students developed a second-chance mentality and many resits were unnecessary.

9.4.2.4 The significance (or insignificance) of resit fees in terms of 'fairness'

One issue of public concern about resits is 'fairness': it has been suggested that resits may have 'inequality' implications for students from poor backgrounds due to additional examination fees (de Waal, 2010). The findings of the questionnaire analysis suggest that resit fees were not a major concern for the students in the study, including those receiving EMA (education maintenance allowance). The students interviewed all said that the unit fees were affordable and that their parents were happy to support them and, if not, they themselves were willingly to pay. The priority for them was the chance for improvement. The chief executive of AQA, one of the A levels awarding bodies, was quoted recently in a newspaper suggesting that there was a case for banning more than one resit per A level (Times, 2010). In response to the question of loss of income, his comment was "yes, if there were less resits we would have less income, but is it right?". My view is that the decreased income for awarding bodies can be viewed in this way: that unnecessary resits are not just a waste of money, time and effort for the students, they are also a waste of money and resources in examination administration. If the money from examination fees for unnecessary, multiple resits were to be re-invested into teaching and learning, the result could be more productive.

9.4.2.5 Inappropriate use of exam documents by students in resit preparation

In terms of revision support, all the students interviewed said that there was no organized help from their college specifically for resitters, and this was supported by the teachers' comments about resits being seen as outside the teachers' normal duties (there could be issues of limited resources; it was noted that many of the special clinics run by the Independent College were fee-charging). The students generally did their own revision and the most common help from their teachers ('minimum' help) was by being given past papers to practice and marking schemes to check their answers. Some of the ways the students used the examination documents were improper and a source for concern. Past papers were used largely to predict what might come up in the examination and marking schemes were used as 'model answers'. When the students saw a 'familiar' question in the examination, they tended to assume that it was the same as the practice one, without reading the question properly in terms of the context or requirements. The students also seemed to rely heavily on the type of questions in the past papers so that when a 'new' type came up in the examination, they were at loss as to how to handle it. Finally, the students seemed to be more concerned about scoring marks according to the marking schemes rather than what was asked in the questions and how it related to the learning of their subject. As a result, the students lacked deep-learning and independent-thinking skills.

9.4.2.6 Need for more support for resitters, especially those with poor exam results

As mentioned above, generally there was little support from teachers on resit preparation. In terms of resit decisions, the research findings suggest that about 40 per cent of the teacher's advice for the students was less than helpful or constructive and the situation seemed to be worse for students with poor examination results, especially at the Sixth-Form College. Insufficient support in resits may be merely unsatisfactory in the case of students with good examination grades but its implications could be much more damaging for those with poor results, as shown in the case of Aaron. This is because students with poor examination results tend to lack the confidence to approach teachers for help; they are thus more likely to be the ones given the 'minimum' help in resit preparation. Unfortunately, without proper guidance, they are also more likely to lack a good understanding of the question requirements or misinterpret the marking schemes. Learning the A2, which seems to have helped many students involved in the

study when they resat the easier AS units, does not always have the same effect for students with poor examination results, as they need to cope with revising for the AS units while trying to learn the more difficult A2 units simultaneously. They are also more likely to feel extra pressure going into the resits due to the fear of failing again because, unlike the other students who have attained a 'safe' result in their earlier attempts, the 'no-penalty' arrangement does not help these students since their previous results were likely to be poor anyway. The whole resit experience tends to weaken their self-esteem rather than strengthen it.

In sum, in all aspects of the resit process, from decision-making to taking the examination, students who do poorly in examinations are those who most need good advice and help from their teachers and, according to the findings of this research, this may not always be forthcoming and the situation is probably worse in some schools and colleges than others.

9.4.2.7 Resit practices and the formation of students' learning habitus

On the whole, based on the way the students interviewed described their learning experience, revision tactics and resit strategies, there was generally a heavy emphasis on examination success in all three colleges in the study. The degree of that emphasis, however, varied from college to college. While acknowledging that the colleges studied are not necessarily representative or typical of their sector or type, the research findings suggest that, due to the more intensive and systematic approach to resits, students from the Independent College were at advantage in terms of making gains on their original examination marks and thus having a higher chance of going to better universities. Since this advantage is produced in part by the conditions and relationships characteristic of the independent sector (e.g. more resources and flexibility in the college's operations), it raises the issue of whether this is more than a local phenomenon.

The findings of this research, however, also suggest that, in making the most use of the resit system, as was the case with the Independent College, some of the practices, such as adopting an 'early examination' policy and encouraging resits generally, also tended to influence the students negatively in the formation of their learning habitus, including developing a heavy reliance on second chances and a strong focus on extrinsic rewards,

performance goals and surface learning, all of which may ill-equip the students for the different emphases in higher education.

9.4.2.8 The changing attitudes of universities towards resit results in A levels

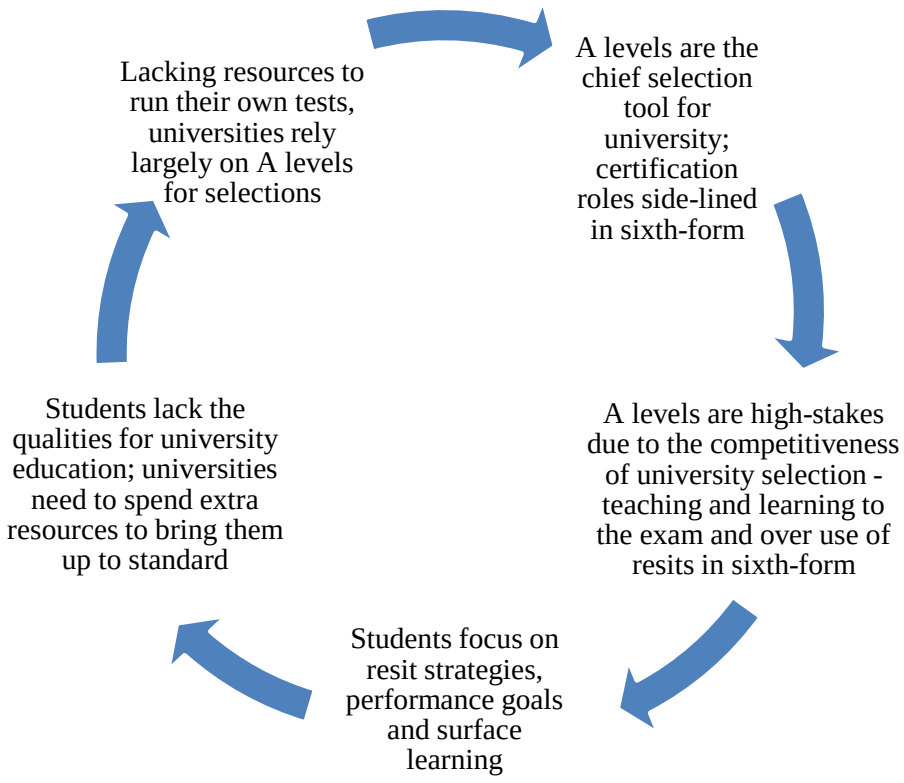
Currently, while repeaters (repeating A levels after the 2-year course) are generally not received favourably by most universities, resitters (resitting within the course) seem to be accepted by the majority with little or no discrimination. The situation, however, may be changing, as some of the shortcomings in the students' learning dispositions which they acquired from sitting and resitting examinations in sixth-form have become more prominent when they enter university. The university admissions tutors interviewed all talked about the students' negative attitudes towards learning, including a lack of passion for learning, insufficient study skills, emphasis on examination-related performance goals, second-chance mentality, lack of independent learning and critical thinking skills, and failure in general to retain the knowledge acquired. There were also suggestions that additional resources were often needed to bring the students up to the level necessary for university education. The admissions tutor for medicine said that his department did not consider resitters; the other two said they included resitters in their shortlists or offers but would normally want to know more about the students' reasons for resitting. Recently, the medical school of University College, London has announced a policy of ignoring resit results (Sunday Times, 2010). The universities' changing attitudes towards resit results in A levels will be likely to have an impact on the practice of resits in schools and colleges, which may be worth further investigation.

9.4.2.9 The cyclical relationship between sixth-form, A levels and university

Looking at the bigger picture based on the research findings, it is fairly clear that the relationship between sixth-form, A levels and university is not a linear one of A levels serving as a bridge from sixth-form to university, but a cyclical one.

In the cyclical relationship offered in the diagram in Figure 9.1 below, it should, however, be noted that there was more evidence from this research in support of the findings in the parts concerning the practices in sixth-form and the effects of resits on student learning than in the parts regarding the practices in universities of relying on A-level results for selection and using resources to bring students up to standard at university.

Figure 9.1: A cyclical relationship between sixth-form, A levels and university



The cyclical relationship works in the following manner. As long as the A levels' stakes are high, it would be unrealistic to expect teachers not to teach to the examination or students not to take up the opportunities offered by resits. The active teaching and learning to the examination has resulted in a narrow focus on performance goals during sixth-form education and, subsequently, a weakening of the development of learner autonomy. The examination culture means that teachers and students spend a lot of time devising resit strategies or revision tactics to meet the examination requirements rather than focusing on learning to acquire the necessary knowledge, competence and skills. The consequence is that the students lack the desirable qualities for university education, such as independent thinking, creativity and deep learning. Universities then have to spend extra resources to remediate the students' learning inadequacies in order to bring them up to the level necessary for higher education. Lacking resources to run their own selection tests, universities have little choice but to rely mostly on A-level results in their admissions selections. This then brings the matter back to the high-stakes nature of A levels due to the competitiveness in university admissions selection.

It can be argued that the cyclical relationship between sixth-form, A levels and university existed long before the implementation of the resit policy, beginning with the widening participation in higher education in the 1980s and the keen competition to get into university because of the potential gains in future career and income resulting from a university degree. This is perhaps where the A levels' resit policy was doomed before it started. Instead of trying to break the deadlock in the cyclical relationship, resits have accentuated the existing assessment culture.

9.4.3 Addressing the research questions

The research questions for this thesis are:

> How do English students make use of resits in A levels during sixth-form education and what are the effects of resits on student learning?

The short answer to the research questions is that the A levels' resit policy, despite its good intentions, has produced some unintended consequences when it comes to actual practice in the classroom, such as elaborate resit strategies and revision tactics, the result of which is the accentuation of the assessment culture in sixth-form education and this tends to affect negatively the students' learning disposition and their future learning career.

The research findings suggest that due to a lack of appreciation of the rationale behind the resit policy, no control of resits and the highly competitive nature of selection by universities, the A levels' resit policy has resulted in some educationally undesirable practices in sixth-form education. Only those who adopt a positive approach to resits, have help from their teachers and work hard to improve their learning and skills gain from the system and these conditions are differentially available to students. For the others, the resit system has resulted in an over-emphasis on A levels in sixth-form education, which involves taking examinations early through rushed teaching, elaborate resit strategies, dubious revision tactics and reliance on second chances. All these contribute to warping students' understanding of what counts as valid knowledge or what it means to learn. The resit system has accentuated the examination-oriented culture in sixth-form education and has resulted in an increased focus on extrinsic

rewards, performance goals and a surface approach to learning, which may ill-equip students for university or life-long learning.

9.5 Trustworthiness and the research limitations

Research will be of little or no use if it is not credible or trustworthy, but at the same time, it is generally acknowledged that research, particularly qualitative research, has its limitations (Brown and Sime, 1981; Patton, 2002). I have included in Chapters 3 and 4 some of the limitations of this research, such as representativeness and interviewer-induced biases. A degree of caution, therefore, needs to be exercised in that the limited data on which the research findings were based may not characterize general resit behaviour. The research was based on voluntary participation. The participation of the colleges was largely because they were interested in the research topic; they were thus more likely to be the ones which tend to make more use of resits. The fact that the colleges as a whole were above average in the A levels league table could also mean that their practices may not be the same as those which do less well in A levels. The views of the university admissions tutors, being from popular degree courses with fairly stringent entry requirements, may differ from those of less-demanding courses. I, therefore, do not expect applicability of the research findings to all students (e.g. not all students dwell on dubious resit strategies) or all schools and colleges (e.g. some schools may brief their students very clearly about resits at the start of sixth-form).

Notwithstanding the data limitations, I have demonstrated that the findings of this research were not simply my own interpretation of the singular accounts of individual participants, but were produced at the end of a lengthy research process involving three colleges of different types and a substantial number of participants in a prolonged engagement. Measures to improve the credibility and trustworthiness of the research (see, for example, Lincoln and Guba, 1985) include the adoption of a triangulation approach using both questionnaire and interview data from multiple sources of information, the piloting of both the questionnaire and the 3-interview structure, careful preparation of the interview schedules, detailed analyses of the questionnaire responses and interview data, use of references and comparisons to other research reports and documents, maintenance of an audit trail with records of working documents, use of a reflexive journal, observation and reflection on feedback and comments from others

about examinations and student learning in general and my interim research findings at seminars and conferences. The research aims to demonstrate the existence, not incidence, of resit practices (Yin, 2003). What this research offers is an intensive study and analysis of the accounts of A-level stakeholders, particularly the students, about their resit experience in order to elucidate the meaning of resits in the context of student learning in sixth-form education.

9.6 Potential value and accessibility

Feedback is important in research; a question commonly asked about research is, "So, what?" (Silverman, 2000). During the research, I attended seminars and conferences and presented papers myself. The first was in June 2008, at a seminar on research organized by and for doctorate students at the University of Sussex, to discuss research methodology and related issues. In August 2010, I presented a paper on some of the research findings at an international conference on educational assessment in Bangkok (Poon Scott, 2010). The paper was well received, with favourable comments about the effectiveness of various quotations to illustrate the findings. Some of the members of the international audience, however, did not seem to grasp the significance of the 'resit' feature within a course, probably because there are no resits in most other high-stakes examinations (resit in their perception refers to repeating the whole examination). After the presentation, I was invited by *Cambridge Assessment* to give a talk at one of their 'Current Issues in Assessment' seminars in Cambridge. That presentation took place on 12 January 2011 with a turnout of some 70 participants, made up largely of administrators from awarding bodies, heads and teachers of schools and colleges, examiners and researchers. With an English audience, the discussion at the end of the presentation was very active, with views ranging from the justification to ban multiple resits to the effectiveness of resit strategies and the increasing interest by universities in obtaining information about resits from students' applications. Following that presentation, I was invited by AQA to give a presentation of the research findings to their research staff, examination administrators and subject managers. That event took place on 21 June 2011 and the discussion afterwards was very fruitful with a focus on the backwash effects of resits on teaching and learning. Apart from giving presentations, I am planning to submit a paper for a journal on educational assessment, whose editor has expressed an interest in an article based on the findings of this research.

What I want to gain from the presentations and discussions at seminars and conferences is not only to inform others in the education and examination community about my research findings or to share with other researchers views about methodological issues and research processes (both of which, I must stress, are important), but also to raise awareness of the possible unintentional effects of resits, particularly multiple resits, on student learning and to provoke more debate on A levels, from fine-tuning (e.g. review of the unlimited resit rule) to medium measures (e.g. review of the modular approach or university-admissions selection criteria) or even major reforms (e.g. review of the position of A levels in the 14-19 education and training qualifications framework).

9.7 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is often regarded as an essential part of social research in tackling the issue of subjectivity (e.g. Bourdieu, 2004). In philosophical terms, reflexivity is an act of self-reference from the inside: "to be an I, a self, is to have the capacity for reflexive self reference" (Nozick, 1981, p.78). In social research, reflexivity is about researchers questioning their own role in the research process (Delanty, 2005). According to May (1998), the researchers' pre-reflexive assumptions are related to their ontological, theoretical and methodological allegiances, and it is important that researchers are reflexive and understand the forces which act upon the research process and the conditions under which these forces operate. Smyth and Shacklock (1998) argue that it would be naive, or even dishonest, to assume value-free positions of neutrality in social research. As Dunne, Pryor and Yates (2005, p.87) suggest: "reflexivity works to allow us to make informed interpretations of what we experience, observe and feel".

The research I did during my career at the HKEAA was largely restricted to the effectiveness of examinations and their administration. As public examinations became more transparent, I had more opportunities to meet teachers and students and recognized first-hand what effect examinations can have on teaching and learning. I have, in the past, argued that public examinations, as an integral part of education, must serve the educational needs of students (Poon Scott, 2000); the aim is to maximize the positive effects and minimize the negative effects of examinations on student learning. As Boud (2000, p.155) suggests: "there is no point in having a reliable summative assessment system if it inhibits the very learning which it seeks to certify".

This research study has strengthened my view that, in developing educational and assessment policies, due consideration needs to be given to their implications for teaching and learning and their impact on education as a whole. There is no point ignoring what is actually happening ('what is') and talking only of the policy's intention ('what should be') by accusing teachers and students of misusing resits. The interests of teachers and students, including the reasons behind their practices, need to be taken into account. As pointed out by Pring et al. (2009, p.187), successful system-wide reform "requires the participation of all relevant parties, not only in implementing policy, but also in shaping it".

9.8 Concluding remarks

I started this research to investigate how students make use of resits in A levels and whether the public perception that the improvement in A-level grades is a result of students getting better at taking examinations because of resits is justified. The research has produced some evidence that the improvement in A-level resits is due to students getting better subject knowledge and skills through maturity in learning and practice, rather than from examination technique alone. On the other hand, the findings also highlight some of the undesirable effects of resits on student learning which are more far-reaching than the immediate gains in examination results. Through exposure to practices such as early examinations, resit strategies, revision tactics and an emphasis on examination performance during the two years of sixth-form education, many students involved in the study were found to have developed a learning habitus which is based on an excess focus on extrinsic rewards, performance goals, a surface approach to learning and second-chance mentality, all of which may ill-equip them for higher education or life-long learning. An education ideology that puts examination success ahead of everything else can seriously damage the value of education by warping students' understanding of what counts as valid knowledge or what it means to learn. The QCA's review of the resit policy in 2007, in my view, failed to sufficiently recognize and address the implications of resits for student learning. Clearly, another review of the A levels' resit policy is required.

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Appendix 1

Development of the Research Questions

Based on the four steps in Green (2008, p. 51)

Go large:

- Who are the sixth-form students in England who want to resit in A levels?
- Why do sixth-form students in England want to resit?
- What do the students know about resits and where do they get the information?
- How do the students view the resit system in terms of fairness?
- When do the students make their minds up about resitting?
- How do the students find the resit decision-making (easy or hard)?
- What are the students' expectations of their resit results?
- Do schools/colleges have a set of guidelines regarding resits for their teachers/students?
- What are the teachers' general attitudes towards resits?
- How do teachers advise their students on whether to resit or not?
- How do the students rate the advice and support of their school/college and teachers?
- Do the students talk to their parents about resits and how do they find their parents' support?
- What factors do students consider in resit decisions and how do they rate the factors' importance?
- What support do colleges and teachers give to students in terms of resit preparations?
- How do the students prepare for the resit (do they have a revision plan)?
- How do students handle the news (good or bad) of their resit results?
- How do resits affect the students in their other subjects in A levels?
- Do the students think that universities care or not care about results based on resits?
- How do A levels perform in their certification and selection roles under the modular resit system?
- How do universities view about results achieved from resits in selecting candidates for admissions?

Narrowing the list:

- What do the students know about resits and how do they value them in terms of fairness?
- What are the general attitudes of schools/colleges towards the resit system?
- When do the students make their resit decisions, what factors do they consider in deciding whether or not to resit and how do they find the resit decision-making?
- What kind of help and support do teachers give to their students in terms of advice and resit preparation and how do the students find the advice and support?
- How do the students make use of resits in sixth-form and how do they prepare for the resits?
- How do resits affect the students in their learning during sixth-form education and how do students view their resit decisions after the results??
- What are the attitudes of universities regarding resit results and do students think universities care about resits or not?
- How do A levels perform in their certification and selection roles under the modular resit system?

Refining the questions:

- How much do English sixth-form students know about the resit system of A levels, and how do they make resit decisions and perform in the resit?
- What kinds of advice and support do English students receive from their teachers and college in making use of resits during sixth-form education and what are the effects of resits on the students' learning in the classroom?
- What are the implications of resits for the effectiveness of A levels in their certification and selection roles at the end of sixth-form education in England?

Review (adding one more question):

- How do students of differing learning dispositions approach the resit challenge and how does the resit experience affect the formation of their learner identity?

Final:

The overarching research questions are:

How do English students make use of resits in A levels during sixth-form education and what are the effects of resits on student learning?

Sub-questions:

1. How much do English sixth-form students know about the resit system of A levels, and how do they make resit decisions and perform in the resit?
2. What kinds of advice and support do English students receive from their teachers and school/college in making use of resits during sixth-form education and what are the effects of resits on the students' learning in the classroom?
3. What are the implications of resits for the effectiveness of A levels in their certification and selection roles at the end of sixth-form education in England?
4. How do students of differing learning dispositions approach the resit challenge and how does the resit experience affect the formation of their learner identity?

Appendix 2

(address)
(telephone no.)
(email address)
6th May, 2008

Principal/Head Teacher
Name of College/School

Dear (title and surname of principal/head teacher),

I am writing to seek your help for a research project which aims to investigate the impact of A/AS modular resits on student learning.

The project is part of my DPhil study at the University of Sussex. My supervisors are Dr. John Pryor and Dr. Sarah Aynsley. Previously, I was the Deputy Secretary General of the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority for eight years until 2004. My research interests are mainly in public examinations, particularly their backwash effects on teaching and learning. The research I am proposing goes beyond the findings of the QCA review in 2007, that resits are part of the reasons for the improvement in A level results in recent years; it rather seeks to investigate the broader impact of resits on student learning.

I hope you will find the proposed research meaningful and worthwhile. I am planning to give out a questionnaire for the Year 13 students in late September. This will be followed by an individual interview with five to six students, those who have decided to resit and have agreed to the interview. I would also like to interview one of your teachers on issues relating to resits. All data collected will be handled by me alone and treated in confidence. I will be happy to give you a copy of the research report and the specific findings relevant to your college.

I would be more than pleased to answer any questions you may have by phone, e-mail, or a visit to your college at your convenience. I am inviting four institutions to participate in the project and I sincerely hope that your college will be one of them. I look forward to hearing from you and thank you.

Yours sincerely,

(Signature)
Eva S.M. Poon Scott (Mrs.)

Appendix 3

An analysis of the three colleges' students' performance in the ASs according to the questionnaire data

No. * achieved	Percentage of students from each college achieving the different number of AS grades in their results														
	AS grade A			AS grade B			AS grade C			AS grade D			AS grade E		
	IND	SF	FE	IND	SF	FE	IND	SF	FE	IND	SF	FE	IND	SF	FE
0	15.8	39.3	69.1	46.5	39.3	33.0	65.8	42.9	34.0	84.2	67.9	54.6	96.5	76.8	70.1
1	14.9	19.6	11.3	28.1	30.4	41.2	23.7	35.7	36.1	14.0	25.0	30.9	3.5	19.6	19.6
2	22.8	17.9	15.5	19.3	21.4	18.6	7.0	19.6	23.7	0.0	7.1	11.3	0.0	3.6	8.2
3	16.7	14.3	2.1	5.3	8.9	4.1	3.5	1.8	4.1	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
4	22.8	8.9	0.0	0.9	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
5	7.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

IND = Independent College; SF = Sixth-Form College; FE = FE College

* The number refers to the number of grades achieved under each grade category (A-E).

For example, the percentage of students from the Independent College with 5 As is 7.0, with 4As is 22.8, with no As is 15.8, etc., whereas the percentage with no Es is 96.5, with 1E is 3.5, and there were no students from this college with 2-5Es.

None of the students from Sixth-Form College or FE College had 5As; 8.9% of students from Sixth-Form College had 4As but none from the FE College.

Appendix 4

Fieldwork Timetable

Date	Activities
May 2008	Letter of invitation to participate in the research project sent to schools and colleges of different types in southern England (four sent in the initial round, one for each school type; another sent to replace one which declined).
June/July 2008	Correspondence by email and telephone with the schools and colleges to answer their queries about the project and to confirm participation.
September 2008	Visits to the colleges which had agreed to participate in the research. Meeting with the coordinator at each college to go over the research objective, data confidentiality, research proceedings and timetable of the questionnaire and interviews.
October 2008	Questionnaires delivered to the college coordinators for administration by the colleges themselves.
November 2008	Collection of completed questionnaires from each college. Initial analysis of questionnaire data to select students for individual interviews. Arrangement with the college coordinator for the student interviews, including confirmation of the interviewees' participation.
November/ December 2008	First round of student interviews: Students briefed about the research project and data confidentiality before the start of the interview; consent forms signed by student and researcher. Conduct of interviews *
February 2009	Conduct of second round of student interviews.
April/May 2009	Conduct of third round of student interviews.
June 2009	Interviews of teachers and college managers. Interviews of university admissions tutors. Complete questionnaire analysis; Individual reports of questionnaire findings (data of own college) delivered to each college with letter of thanks.
September 2009	Contact students about their final results in A levels.

* Work associated with each interview included:

1. Preparing the interview schedule (adjustments made for individual interviewees).
2. Making the interview appointment (through the coordinator at the Independent College and by emailing the students direct at the other two colleges for the 2nd and 3rd rounds).
3. Booking the interview venue at the college (booking at the 'learning centre' through the form tutor at the FE college; bookings made by the coordinators at the other two colleges).
4. Conducting and recording the interview.
5. Uploading the digital recordings onto the computer for record and backup.
6. Transcribing the interview data.

Appendix 5

A General Description of the Student Interviewees

College	Student name (fictitious)	Gender	Examination results * (based on the AS results indicated on the questionnaire)	Number of resits in January 2009		No. of # resit units intended for June 2009
				No. of AS subjects	Total no. of units	
Sixth-Form College	Aaron	M	Low	2	3	0
	Brian	M	Medium	1	1	0
	Cathy	F	Low	3	4	1
	Doris	F	High	3	5	2
FE College	Edward	M	High	2	2	0
	Frank	M	Low	2	4	1
	George	M	Medium	2	2	0
	Helen	F	High	1	1	3
Independent College	Jack	M	Medium	3	4	2
	Kenneth	M	Medium	3	6	1
	Liz	F	High	3	4	0
	Michelle	F	High	1	1	1
	Nicole	F	Low	3	6	2
	Peter	M	High	2	3	2

* High: AS results mainly As and Bs; Medium: mainly Bs and Cs; Low: mainly Cs

Based on the students' indications at the interview; the resits included both AS and A2 units.

The students were amongst the last cohort of students taking three units each of the AS and A2 modules.

Appendix 6

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/letters/article6809764.ece

The Times

August 26, 2009

Letter to the Editor

Sir, Malcolm Kay (letter, Aug 24) suggests that resitting exams might be a cause for grade inflation in A-level results. As part of my doctorate research on A/AS re-sits, I interviewed some Year 13 students from three schools/colleges earlier this year. Most of them improved their results in the re-sits, and this could be due to a number of factors, such as less exam pressure in the re-sits, better understanding of their own weaknesses in the subject, greater familiarization of the subject in the upper year, and so on.

However, most importantly, the students were shocked with their first result and worked hard for the re-sits. The modular system and its re-sit arrangement make it possible for students to know their interim performance in the A levels and to do something to improve it. Re-sitting an exam does not automatically mean better results or ”grade inflation”. The improvement represents commitment to do better, more effort and hard work and, as one student put it when asked about fairness of the re-sit system: “It’s not cheating; we worked hard to improve our results and we earned it.”

Eva Poon Scott

University of Sussex

Appendix 7

Research study of A/AS modular resits

Interview Consent Form

Name of interviewee:

College:

I agree to be interviewed for the purposes of this research and for the interview to be recorded.

The purpose of the interview has been explained to me and any questions that I asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that the data collected will be used for this research and any further analysis associated with it, and that my identity and that of my college will be protected.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Name of interviewer:

I have explained the research and the interview purposes to the interviewee and I believe that the consent is informed.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 8

Research Ethics

Sussex Institute's Standards and Guidelines on Research Ethics Checklist, 2008

(Including actions taken in the project against each item on the checklist)

Standards 1&3: Safeguard the interests and rights of those involved or affected by the research. Establish informed consent.	
1.1	I have considered the well-being of those involved in the research. The purpose of the research and the use of the research outcome were explained to the participants accordingly beforehand.
1.2	Participation of all involved was on a voluntary basis. Access to the students was through their college. Written consent forms were signed by all interviewees, who were informed of their right to refuse or withdraw at the time.
1.3	The purpose and processes of the research were explained to the colleges in writing and also during the visit to the colleges at the start of the research. The purpose of the research was described on the questionnaire and explained in more detail to the interviewees before the interview. Students wishing to take part in the interviews were reminded of the time commitment for the three interviews at the start of the first interview.
1.4	Participation of all participants was on an overt basis.
1.5	The colleges were given interim reports on the questionnaire findings (their own college's data) and were kept informed of the progress of the research.
1.6	The colleges were shown the draft student questionnaire at the first meeting and invited to comment on the design. The colleges were satisfied with the questionnaire.
1.7	Conditional anonymity and confidentially were offered. The colleges were known by their institution type. Names of the students, teachers, institutions and universities were withheld. Each interviewee was represented by their fictitious name (students), subject (teachers), college type (college managers) or course (admissions tutors) on the transcripts and in the report.
1.8	The colleges were told in advance that their general location (southern England) and their institution type (e.g. sixth-form college) would be identified in the report and that there was a very remote chance that the institution, despite anonymity, might be identifiable.

Standards 2: Ensure legislative requirements on human rights and data protection have been met	
2.1	I have considered the legislation of the Data Protection Act, Disability Discrimination Act, Human Rights Act, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. All data, including the completed questionnaires, interview recordings and transcripts, were stored either electronically (on PC or storage devices) or physically (hardcopies) by myself, the researcher, and efforts and safeguards have been made to protect them in a safe location. The purpose and method of storing data, including secondary analysis, were explained to the college, in terms of all data being processed by me only and kept confidentially. Laws protecting the rights of disabled people (although not applicable) noted. Relevant ethical issues, such as those regarding working with young people, were considered and observed.
Standards 4: Develop the highest possible standards of research practices including in research design, data collection, storage, analysis, interpretation and reporting	
4.1	The research has reviewed and considered a wide spectrum of literature and relevant research reports. The review was ongoing throughout the research.
4.2	Methods which are considered to be fit for purpose have been identified.
4.3	Appropriate data collection methods were used to address the research questions.
4.4	Methods for verifying data, such as using data from different sources, have been built into the research design.
Standard 5: Consider the consequences of your work or its misuse for those you study and other interested parties	
5.1	The consequences of the research findings from the different perspectives of the participants and the researcher have been considered and reported as appropriate.
5.2	No cost was expected of the participants, except for the time spent on the research, such as attending interviews or completing the questionnaire.
5.4	Flexibility had been included in the research schedule to ensure that time could be spent discussing issues that might arise from the effects of the research on the participants.
Standard 6: Ensure appropriate external professional ethical committee approval is granted where relevant	
6.1	My two academic supervisors have read, commented on, and endorsed the research proposal and draft chapters of the thesis.
6.4	Reference has been made to the relevant aspects of the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004) issued by the British Educational Research Association.

Appendix 9

Questionnaire – Pilot Study
Feedback Form

1. How long did it take you to complete the questionnaire? _____ minutes.
2. How did you find the questionnaire generally? (please tick one for each item)

Length:	☐ Too long	☐ Quite long	☐ Quite short	☐ Too short
Clarity:	☐ Very clear	☐ Quite clear	☐ Not very clear	☐ Not clear at all
Questions:	☐ Very interesting	☐ Quite interesting	☐ Quite boring	☐ Very boring

Which questions do you think need to be improved? Please give your suggestions below:

Qn. No.	Suggestions for improvement

3. Which questions did you find too difficult or almost impossible to answer? Qn. Nos. _____

Why?_____

4. Is there any information on the questionnaire which you found to be inaccurate or misleading?

Qn. Nos. _____ Details: _____

5. For those questions where you were asked to rate factors/statements. Did you find them easy or hard?

☐ Very easy ☐ Quite easy ☐ Quite difficult ☐ Very difficult

Which questions did you find it hard to rate the factors/statements? Qn. Nos. _____

Why? _____

6. For those questions where you were given a list of options/statements to tick or rate, did you find the lists adequate? _____ Please give your suggestions below:

Qn. No.	Options/statements to be added or amended:

7. Overall comments: _____

_____

Appendix 10

Questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of a research study of A/AS modular re-sits. Data collected will be treated confidentially and used only for the purpose of the study. ***Your name and personal data will not be disclosed***.

1. **Name:** _____

2. **Gender** (tick as appropriate) ☐ Male ☐ Female

3. **Ethnic origin** (e.g. White, Indian, Black, Pakistani, Chinese, etc.) _____

4. **Do you receive a government grant/EMA for your A-level education?** ☐ Yes ☐ No

5. **What were your GCSE results?**

Grade	A*	A	B	C	D	E
How many?						

6. **What were your AS modular results in Year 12?**

Name of subject	Grade achieved

Name of subject	Grade achieved

7. **Did you drop an AS module you took in Year 12 and/or study a new AS module in Year 13?**

☐ No ☐ Yes (please complete the following table)

Name of AS subject (module) dropped:	New AS module(s) taken in Year 13:	
	Name of new subject (modules)	Exam month(s)

8. **Which subjects' <u>A2 modules</u> are you taking in Year 13?**

Name of subject	Exam month(s)

Name of subject	Exam month(s)

9. **Where or from whom did you learn about the A/AS re-sit rule?**

Source of information:	Tick if you did ***not*** use information from this source	If you had used the information from this source, tick one box below to rate its usefulness in helping you to learn about the re-sit rule. (***5=extremely useful;*** ***1= not at all useful***)				
		5	4	3	2	1
Guidelines provided by your college						
Teachers and/or other college staff						
Government/exam board publications						
Student websites						
Parents						
Friends						
Others (*please specify*):						

10. Answer the following questions according to your understanding of the A/AS re-sit rule.

(a) How many times can you, as an A level student, re-sit a particular AS/A2 module/unit? _____

(b) How many AS/A2 modules/units can you re-sit altogether? _____

(c) Who pays for your re-sit exam fee? _____

(d) What will happen to your re-sit result? (please tick one below)

☐ The re-sit result will replace the old result automatically regardless of the outcome.
☐ The re-sit result will replace the old result automatically only if it is better than the old result.
☐ The re-sit result will replace the old result only if you request the exam board to do so.

11. Are you going to <u>re-sit</u> any of the AS module/units you took in Year 12?

☐ Yes (please give details of the module/units you will be re-sitting and your reasons for re-sitting the

Exam month(s)	Name of subject (module/units)	I am re-sitting this because:

☐ No (please give your reason for not re-sitting):

I decided not to re-sit because: _____

_____

_____

12. How accurate is each of the following statements as it applies to your decision about whether to re-sit or not?

	Tick one box below to rate how accurate that statement is as it applies to you. (***5=extremely accurate;*** ***1= not at all accurate***)				
	5	4	3	2	1
It was a hard decision for me.					
It took me a long time to decide.					
I had to consider many factors.					
I relied heavily on advice from others.					
It was not really my decision alone.					
I wish I did not have to make this decision.					

13. When did you decide to re-sit or not? (please tick one)

☐ Immediately after the AS results were known ☐ During the summer ☐ At the start of Year 13

Further comments: _____

_____

14. What advice did your teacher give you individually about whether you should re-sit or not?

_____

_____

_____

15. Did you talk to your parent(s) about whether you should re-sit or not?

☐ Yes

Why? (please tick one)

☐	because my parent(s) have done A levels themselves; they are able to give me advice and/or they are interested in what I do in sixth-form.
☐	because although my parent(s) did not do A levels, they are interested in what I do in sixth-form and I wanted to hear their views.

☐ No

Why? (please tick one)

☐	because although my parent(s) have done A levels themselves, they leave my education in sixth-form pretty much to my teachers and me.
☐	because my parent(s) did not do A levels; they either won't be able to give me advice or they leave my education in sixth-form pretty much to my teachers and me.

Other reasons/comments: _____

16. What advice did you seek or receive in your decision about whether to re-sit or not?

Advice from:	Tick if you did ***not*** seek or receive any advice from this source	If you had sought or received advice from this source, tick one box below to rate how influential that advice was in your decision about whether to re-sit or not. (***5=extremely influential;*** ***1= not at all influential***)				
		5	4	3	2	1
Subject teachers						
Form tutor						
Parents						
Friends						
Government publications						
Exam board publications						
Student websites						
Others (*please specify):*						

17. What factors did you consider in your decision about whether to re-sit or not?

Factor:	Tick if you did ***not*** consider this factor at all	If you had considered this factor, tick one box below to rate how influential that factor was in your decision about whether to re-sit or not. (***5=extremely influential;*** ***1= not at all influential***)				
		5	4	3	2	1
Exam fees						
Timetable clashes						
Revision time/effort for the re-sit						
Exam pressure						
Time which could otherwise be used on A2 modules						
The importance of improving your result						
The chances of the re-sit improving your result						
Effect on university applications						
Others (*please specify*)*:*						

18. Do you think that allowing students to re-sit AS/A2 modules is ☐ fair ☐ not fair ***because*** ____

_____

19. Do you want the re-sit rule to continue in the A level exam system?

☐ Yes

Why? (you may tick one or more)

☐	because it is fair (for the reason you gave above).
☐	because A levels are important and students should be given another chance to improve them.
☐	because some students may not perform their best in their first attempts due to various reasons.
☐	other reasons (please specify):

☐ No

Why? (you may tick one or more)

☐	because it is not fair (for the reason you gave above).
☐	because it places too much emphasis on exams over other sixth-form activities.
☐	because some students may not then take their first exam attempts seriously.
☐	other reasons (*please specify*):

20. What do you plan to do after Year 13? (please tick one)

☐	Go to university or other higher-education institution (with or without a gap year)
☐	Start working or an apprenticeship
☐	Others (*please specify*): _____

21. What factors do you think universities or employers take into account when selecting candidates?

Factor:	Tick if you ***don't*** think they will consider this factor	If you think universities or employers will consider this factor**,** tick one box below to rate how important you think that factor is to them. (***5=extremely important;*** ***1= not at all important***)				
		5	4	3	2	1
A /AS level subject grades						
A/AS level subject component marks						
Appraisal report from your college						
Extracurricular activities or work experience						
What you write about yourself on the application form						
Performance at interviews						
Others (*please specify*):						

22. Do you think universities or employers ☐ **care** ☐ **do not care** whether their candidates have re-sat some modules in the A level exams ***because*** : _____

_____

23. What do you think are the important aspects of sixth-form education?

Aspects of sixth-form education in terms of:	Tick one box below to rate how important that aspect is to you. (***5=extremely important;*** ***1= not at all important***)				
	5	4	3	2	1
achieving good qualifications for better jobs later in life					
making good AL grades for a place in the university of your choice					
knowledge acquired in the subjects you have chosen					
skills learnt (e.g. working in groups, debating skills, leadership skills)					
experience gained (e.g. social interactions, independence)					
others (*please specify*):					

*** * * * * * * * ***

Interviews will be carried out with some students at different stages in Year 13 for this research.

The aim of the interviews is for you to talk about your re-sit experience.

Please complete the following if you are happy to participate in the interview exercise. All information collected at the interviews will be treated confidentially. Your help will be most appreciated.

Yes, I am willing to be interviewed for the purpose of this research.

Signature: _____

Thank you very much for your help!

Appendix 11

List of data variables in the student questionnaire data file - SPSS file layout

Field	Variable name	Type	Width	Decimal	Label	Value	Missing	Columns	Align	Measure
1	id	Numeric	4	0	student id	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
2	college	Numeric	1	0	college id	{2,3,4}	None	5	Right	Nominal
3	gender	Numeric	1	0	gender	{1, 2}	None	6	Right	Nominal
4	ethnic	Numeric	1	0	ethnic origin	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8}	None	6	Right	Nominal
5	EMA	Numeric	1	0	EMA	{1, 2}	None	5	Right	Nominal
6	gcseAA	Numeric	2	0	no. of GCSE A*	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11	None	6	Right	Scale
7	gcseA	Numeric	1	0	no. of GCSE A	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9}	None	6	Right	Scale
8	gcseB	Numeric	1	0	no. of GCSE B	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9}	None	6	Right	Scale
9	gcseC	Numeric	1	0	no. of GCSE C	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9}	None	6	Right	Scale
10	gcseD	Numeric	1	0	no. of GCSE D	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9}	None	6	Right	Scale
11	gcseE	Numeric	1	0	no. of GCSE E	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9}	None	6	Right	Scale
12	gcseno	Numeric	2	0	total no. of GCSEs	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10,}	None	6	Right	Scale
13	ASsub1	Numeric	3	0	AS subject 1 (code table	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
14	ASgd1	Numeric	1	0	AS grade 1	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	5	Right	Nominal
15	ASsub2	Numeric	3	0	AS subject 2	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
16	ASgd2	Numeric	1	0	AS grade 2	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	5	Right	Nominal
17	ASsub3	Numeric	3	0	AS subject 3	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
18	ASgd3	Numeric	1	0	AS grade 3	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	5	Right	Nominal
19	ASsub4	Numeric	3	0	AS subject 4	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
20	ASgd4	Numeric	1	0	AS grade 4	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	5	Right	Nominal
21	ASsub5	Numeric	3	0	AS subject 5	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
22	ASgd5	Numeric	1	0	AS grade 5	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	5	Right	Nominal
23	ASno	Numeric	1	0	no. of AS subj	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	4	Right	Scale
24	ASA	Numeric	1	0	no. of AS gradeA	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	4	Right	Scale
25	ASB	Numeric	1	0	no. of AS gradeB	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	4	Right	Scale
26	ASC	Numeric	1	0	no. of AS gradeC	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	4	Right	Scale
27	ASD	Numeric	1	0	no. of AS gradeD	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	4	Right	Scale
28	ASE	Numeric	1	0	no. of AS gradeE	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	4	Right	Scale
29	dropadd	Numeric	1	0	drop or add	{1, 2}	None	6	Right	Nominal
30	ASdrop1	Numeric	3	0	AS dropped 1	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
31	ASdrop2	Numeric	3	0	AS dropped 2	None	None	6	Right	Nominal

32	ASnew1	Numeric	3	0	new AS 1	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
33	ASnew2	Numeric	3	0	new AS 2	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
34	A2no	Numeric	1	0	no. of A2 modules	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
35	A2sub1	Numeric	3	0	A2 name 1	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
36	A2mth1	Numeric	1	0	A2 month 1	{1, 6}	None	6	Right	Nominal
37	A2sub2	Numeric	3	0	A2 name 2	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
38	A2mth2	Numeric	1	0	A2 month 2	{1, 6}	None	6	Right	Nominal
39	A2sub3	Numeric	3	0	A2 name 3	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
40	A2mth3	Numeric	1	0	A2 month 3	{1, 6}	None	6	Right	Nominal
41	A2sub4	Numeric	3	0	A2 name 4	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
42	A2mth4	Numeric	1	0	A2 month 4	{1, 6}	None	6	Right	Nominal
43	A2sub5	Numeric	3	0	A2 name 5	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
44	A2mth5	Numeric	1	0	A2 month 5	{1, 6}	None	6	Right	Nominal
45	source0	Numeric	1	0	no source used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
46	sor1used	Numeric	1	0	source 1 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
47	source1	Numeric	1	0	sre - coll guidelines	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
48	sor2used	Numeric	1	0	source 2 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
49	source2	Numeric	1	0	sre- teachers	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
50	sor3used	Numeric	1	0	source 3 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
51	source3	Numeric	1	0	sre- govt/exam bd	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
52	sor4used	Numeric	1	0	source 4 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
53	source4	Numeric	1	0	sre- stud website	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
54	sor5used	Numeric	1	0	source 5 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
55	source5	Numeric	1	0	sre- parents	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
56	sor6used	Numeric	1	0	source 6 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
57	source6	Numeric	1	0	sre- friends	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
58	sourceO	Numeric	1	0	sre- others	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
59	sourceOD	Numeric	2	0	sre-others code	None	None	8	Right	Nominal
60	infocorr	Numeric	1	0	no. of correct info	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
61	infoqn1	Numeric	1	0	no. of times	{1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9}	None	6	Right	Nominal
62	infoqn2	Numeric	1	0	no. of modules/units	{1, 2, 3, 8, 9}	None	6	Right	Nominal
63	infoqn3	Numeric	1	0	who pays	{1, 2, 3, 4}	None	6	Right	Nominal
64	infoqn4	Numeric	1	0	results outcome	{1, 2, 3}	None	6	Right	Nominal
65	resit	Numeric	1	0	resit or not	{1, 2)	None	6	Right	Nominal
66	resitno	Numeric	1	0	no. of resits	{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale

67	Nreason	Numeric	2	0	not resit reason	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
68	rssub1	Numeric	3	0	resit subject 1	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
69	rsmn1	Numeric	1	0	resit month 1	{1, 6}	None	6	Right	Ordinal
70	reason1	Numeric	3	0	resit reason 1	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
71	rssub2	Numeric	3	0	resit subject 2	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
72	rsmn2	Numeric	1	0	resit month 2	{1, 6}	None	6	Right	Ordinal
73	reason2	Numeric	3	0	resit reason 2	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
74	rssub3	Numeric	3	0	resit subject 3	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
75	rsmn3	Numeric	1	0	resit month 3	{1, 6}	None	6	Right	Ordinal
76	reason3	Numeric	3	0	resit reason 3	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
77	rssub4	Numeric	3	0	resit subject 4	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
78	rsmn4	Numeric	1	0	resit month 4	{1, 6}	None	6	Right	Ordinal
79	reason4	Numeric	3	0	resit reason 4	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
80	decide1	Numeric	1	0	dec- hard	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
81	decide2	Numeric	1	0	dec- long time	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
82	decide3	Numeric	1	0	dec- many factors	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
83	decide4	Numeric	1	0	dec- much advice	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
84	decide5	Numeric	1	0	dec- own decision	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
85	decide6	Numeric	1	0	dec- dont' want	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
86	when	Numeric	1	0	when decided	{1, 2, 3}	None	6	Center	Ordinal
87	teachadv	Numeric	3	0	teacher adv code	None	None	7	Right	Nominal
88	partalk	Numeric	1	0	talked to parents?	{1, 2}	None	5	Right	Nominal
89	parcare	Numeric	2	0	parents concern	{11, 12, 21, 22}	None	6	Right	Nominal
90	parent	Numeric	1	0	parents' education	{1, 2}	None	6	Right	Nominal
91	advice0	Numeric	1	0	no advice used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
92	adv1used	Numeric	1	0	advice 1 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
93	advice1	Numeric	1	0	adv- teachers	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
94	adv2used	Numeric	1	0	advice 2 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
95	advice2	Numeric	1	0	adv- form tutor	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
96	adv3used	Numeric	1	0	advice 3 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
97	advice3	Numeric	1	0	adv- parents	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
98	adv4used	Numeric	1	0	advice 4 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
99	advice4	Numeric	1	0	adv- friends	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
100	adv5used	Numeric	1	0	advice 5 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
101	advice5	Numeric	1	0	adv- govt publ	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale

102	adv6used	Numeric	1	0	advice 6 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
103	advice6	Numeric	1	0	adv- exam board	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
104	adv7used	Numeric	1	0	advice 7 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
105	advice7	Numeric	1	0	adv- stud website	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
106	adviceO	Numeric	1	0	adv- others	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
107	adviceOD	Numeric	2	0	adv-others code	None	None	8	Right	Nominal
108	factor0	Numeric	1	0	no factor used	{0, 1}	None	5	Right	Nominal
109	fac1used	Numeric	1	0	factor 1 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
110	factor1	Numeric	1	0	fct- exam fees	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	5	Right	Scale
111	fac2used	Numeric	1	0	factor 2 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
112	factor2	Numeric	1	0	fct- timetable	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	5	Right	Scale
113	fac3used	Numeric	1	0	factor 3 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
114	factor3	Numeric	1	0	fct- revision time	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	5	Right	Scale
115	fac4used	Numeric	1	0	factor 4 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
116	factor4	Numeric	1	0	fct- exam pressure	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	5	Right	Scale
117	fac5used	Numeric	1	0	factor 5 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
118	factor5	Numeric	1	0	fct- time for A2	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	5	Right	Scale
119	fac6used	Numeric	1	0	factor 6 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
120	factor6	Numeric	1	0	fct- importance	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	5	Right	Scale
121	fac7used	Numeric	1	0	factor 7 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
122	factor7	Numeric	1	0	fct- chance of imp	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	5	Right	Scale
123	fac8used	Numeric	1	0	factor 8 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
124	factor8	Numeric	1	0	fct- effect on uni	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	5	Right	Scale
125	factorO	Numeric	1	0	fct- others	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
126	factorOD	Numeric	2	0	fct-others code	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
127	fair	Numeric	1	0	fair or not?	{1, 2}	None	4	Right	Nominal
128	whyfair	Numeric	3	0	reason for fair or not	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
129	continue	Numeric	1	0	continue or not?	{1, 2}	None	6	Right	Nominal
130	contrsno	Numeric	1	0	no. of cont reasons	{1, 2, 3}	None	6	Right	Ordinal
131	whycont1	Numeric	1	0	cont(or not) reason1	{0, 1}	None	7	Right	Nominal
132	whycont2	Numeric	1	0	cont(or not) reason2	{0, 1}	None	7	Right	Nominal
133	whycont3	Numeric	1	0	cont(or not) reason3	{0, 1}	None	7	Right	Nominal
134	whycontO	Numeric	1	0	cont(or not) reasonO	None	None	7	Right	Nominal
135	cont1	Numeric	1	0	reason 1 only	None	None	4	Right	Nominal
136	cont2	Numeric	1	0	reason 2 only	None	None	4	Right	Nominal

137	cont3	Numeric	1	0	reason 3 only	None	None	4	Right	Nominal
138	cont12	Numeric	1	0	reasons 1&2	None	None	5	Right	Nominal
139	cont13	Numeric	1	0	reasons 2&3	None	None	5	Right	Nominal
140	cont23	Numeric	1	0	reasons 1&3	None	None	5	Right	Nominal
141	cont123	Numeric	3	0	all 3 reasons	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
142	plan	Numeric	1	0	plan after Year 13	{1, 2, 3}	None	4	Right	Nominal
143	univ0	Numeric	1	0	no univ factor used	{0, 1}	None	4	Right	Nominal
144	uni1used	Numeric	1	0	uni factor 1 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
145	univ1	Numeric	1	0	uni- AL grades	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	4	Right	Scale
146	uni2used	Numeric	1	0	uni factor 2 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
147	univ2	Numeric	1	0	uni- AL marks	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	4	Right	Scale
148	uni3used	Numeric	1	0	uni factor 3 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
149	univ3	Numeric	1	0	uni- college report	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	4	Right	Scale
150	uni4used	Numeric	1	0	uni factor 4 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
151	univ4	Numeric	1	0	uni- extracurricular	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	4	Right	Scale
152	uni5used	Numeric	1	0	uni factor 5 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
153	univ5	Numeric	1	0	uni- own statement	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	4	Right	Scale
154	uni6used	Numeric	1	0	uni factor 6 used	{0, 1}	None	6	Right	Nominal
155	univ6	Numeric	1	0	uni- interviews	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	4	Right	Scale
156	univO	Numeric	1	0	uni- others	{0, 1}	None	4	Right	Nominal
157	univOD	Numeric	2	0	uni- others code	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
158	unicare	Numeric	1	0	universities care?	{1, 2}	None	5	Right	Nominal
159	whycare	Numeric	3	0	why uni care code1	None	None	6	Right	Nominal
160	aspect1	Numeric	1	0	asp- good job	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
161	aspect2	Numeric	1	0	asp- good uni	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
162	aspect3	Numeric	1	0	asp- knowledge	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
163	aspect4	Numeric	1	0	asp- skills	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
164	aspect5	Numeric	1	0	asp- experience	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
165	aspectO	Numeric	1	0	asp- others	{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}	None	6	Right	Scale
166	aspectOD	Numeric	2	0	asp- others code	None	None	8	Right	Nominal
167	intervw	Numeric	1	0	agree to interview?	{1, 2}	None	6	Right	Nominal

Appendix 11

Student Questionnaire
Dataset Code Book

Variable	SPSS variable name	Coding instructions
Student identity number	id	4-digit numeric code for each student; first digit representing the college identity code
College identity code	college	Numeric code for each college
Gender	gender	Numeric code for male (1) or female (2)
Ethnic origin	ethnic	Numeric code for each ethnic origin
EMA	EMA	Numeric code for yes (1) or no (2)
No. of GCSE at each grade	gcse(i)	Numeric number for each grade (1 to 5 for A to E)
No. of GCSEs taken	gcseno	Compute: No. of GCSEs = no. of A* + …..+ no. of E
AS subject	ASsub(i)	3-digit numeric code for different subjects (set up subject code table)
AS grade	ASgd(i)	Numeric code for different grades (1 to 5; A=1)
No. of AS subjects	ASno	Compute: No. of ASs = no. of AS A + …..+ no. of AS E
No. of AS subjects at each grade	AS(i)	Add up total number at each grade
Drop or add AS subjects	dropadd	Numeric code for yes or no (1=yes)
AS subjects dropped	ASdrop(i)	Numeric code (use code in subject code table)
AS subjects added	ASnew(i)	Numeric code (use code in subject code table)
No. of A2 modules	A2no	Numeric code
A2 subjects	A2sub(i)	Numeric code (use code in subject code table)
A2 subjects' month of exam	A2mth(i)	Numeric code for January or June (1, 6)
Information source: none used	source0	0=none used; 9=all missing, 8= mix of none and missing
Information source used	sorused(i)	0 (not used) or 9 (missing) for each source not used
Rating of source of information	source(i)	Numeric code for rating of each source (1 to 5)
No. of correct answers about resit	infocorr	Add up the total of number of correct answers
Answers about resit	infoqn(i)	Numeric code for different answers
Resit or not?	resit	Numeric code for yes or no (1. 2)
No. of subjects resitting	resitno	Numeric code; 0 if not resitting
Reason for not resitting	nreason	Numeric code (set up not-resitting reason code table)
Resitting subject	rssub(i)	Numeric code (use code in subject code table)
Resitting month	rsmn(i)	Numeric code for January or June

Resitting reason	reason(i)	Numeric code for different reasons (set up resit-reason code table)
Decision aspects	decide(i)	Numeric code for rating of each decision aspect (1 to 5)
When decision made?	when	Numeric code (1-3) for each of the three answers
Teacher's advice	teachadv	Numeric code for teacher's advice (set up teacher-advice code table)
Talked to parents?	partalk	Numeric code for yes or no (1, 2)
Reason for talking or not to parent	parcare	11=because parents done A levels and interested 12=parents not done A levels but interestd 21=parents done A levels but leave it to college 22=parents not done A levels and leave it to college 13-19=other reasons for talking (set up parent-talking code table) 23-29=other reasons for not talking (set up parent-not-talking code table)
Parent's A level indicator	parent	Compute: 1=did A levels (if parcare=11 or 21) 2=did not do A levels (if parcare=12 or 22)
Advice: none used	advice0	0=none used; 9=all missing, 8= mix of none and missing
Advice used	advused(i)	0 (not used) or 9 (missing) for source not used
Rating of advice used	advice(i)	Numeric code for rating of advice (1 to 5)
Factor: none used	factor0	0=none used; 9=all missing, 8= mix of none and missing
Factor used	facused(i)	0 (not used) or 9 (missing) for each factor not used
Rating of factor used	factor(i)	Numeric code for rating of each factor (1 to 5)
Is the re-sit system fair?	fair	Numeric code for yes or no (1, 2)
Why is it fair or not fair?	whyfair	Numeric code (set up fair-or-not reason code table)
Should resit system continue?	continue	Numeric code for yes or no (1, 2)
No. of reasons for continue/not	contrsno	Count total number of reasons used
Reason for continue or not	whycont(i)	Numeric code for reason not ticked (0) or ticked (1)
Number of reasons ticked used	cont(i)	Numeric code showing whether only one reason (or two or all three) ticked, showing which ones were ticked
Post-13 plan	plan	Numeric code for choices (1, 2)
University factor: none used	univ0	0=none used; 9=all missing, 8= mix of none and missing
University factor used	uniused(i)	0 (not used) or 9 (missing) for each factor not used
Rating of university factor used	uni(i)	Numeric code for rating of each factor (1 to 5)
Do uni or employers care?	unicare	Numeric code for yes or no (1, 2)
Reason for care or not care	whycare	Numeric code for reason (set up care-or-not-care reason code table)
Aspect of education	aspect(i)	Numeric code for rating of each aspect of education (1 - 5)
Agree to interview?	intervw	Numeric code for yes or no (1, 2)

(i) Refers to more than one variable with the same coding instructions

Appendix 13

Student Questionnaire Analysis

Introduction

Students from Year 13 taking A-levels in one sixth-form college, one further-education college and one independent college in south England were invited to participate in a questionnaire exercise as part of the research on A-level resits. The exercise was conducted in October 2008. 500 questionnaires were issued and 267 questionnaires were completed; the overall return rate was 49%.

A copy of the questionnaire is given in Appendix 10.

This report gives a full analysis of all the data captured on the questionnaire. Not all analysis was referred to in the thesis, where the questionnaire findings were combined with those of the interviews in reporting the research findings.

The objective of the questionnaire was to examine a wide range of aspects associated with resits, including the students' views about resits and their resit-decision process. The findings of the analysis are presented under the following areas:

1. What were the characteristics of the research participants, including college attended, gender, ethnic origin, EMA status, parents' education level, and what was their resit pattern?
2. Where did the students learn about resits and how useful did they find that information?
3. How well did the students know about the resit rules?
4. How did the students find the resit decision process in terms of timing and difficulty and were parents involved in the students' decisions?
5. What were the students' reasons for resitting or not?
6. What advice did the students say their teachers gave them regarding their resit decision?
7. From whom or where did the students seek and use advice in deciding to resit and how influential were they in the students' resit decision?
8. What factors did the students consider and how important were they in the students' resit decision?
9. What were the students' views about fairness of the resit system?
10. What were the students' views about whether the resit system should continue or not and for what reasons?
11. What factors did the students think universities and employers will take account of in selecting candidates and did the students think that universities and employers care about resits or not?
12. How did the students rate the importance of different aspects of education in their sixth-form education?

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Questionnaire analysis

1 General statistics

1.1 Participant statistics

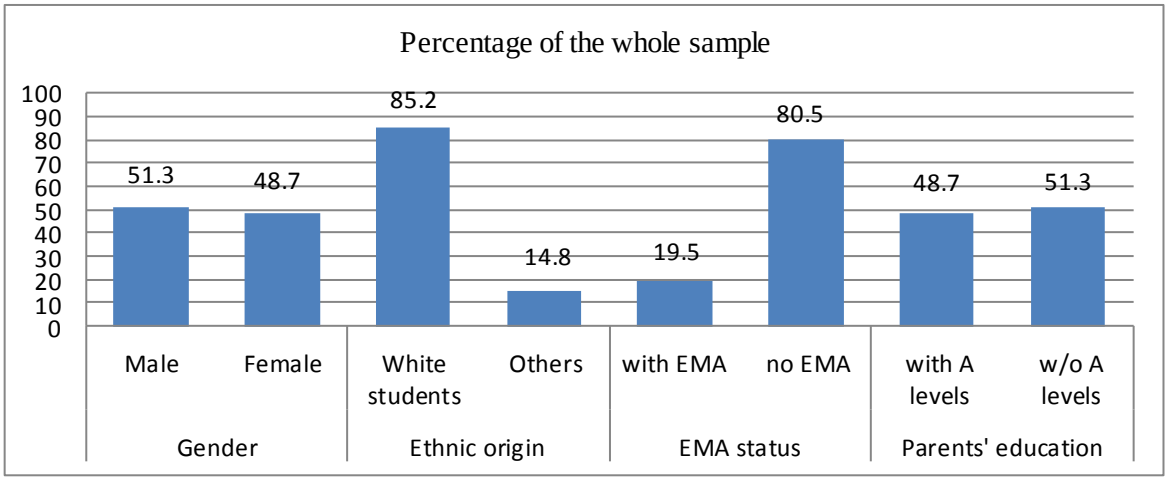
Students from Year 13 taking A-level courses in three colleges were invited to participate in a questionnaire exercise. The colleges comprised of one sixth-form college (SF College), one further-education college (FE College) and an independent school with sixth-form (IND College). The participation statistics of the three colleges are as follows:

Table 1.1 Questionnaire returns by college

College	Questionnaires issued	Questionnaire completed	Return rate	% of all returns
SF College	200	56	28.0%	20.97%
FE College	200	97	48.5%	36.33%
IND College	150	114	76.0%	42.70%
Whole sample	550	267	48.5%	100.00%

The focus of this study is on the whole sample. Where appropriate, however, the 267 student participants were also analyzed by their college, gender, ethnic origin, EMA status and parents' education level (in terms of whether they had A-level qualifications, which was derived from the students' choice of answers to question 15 on the questionnaire). The statistics of the participants by different groups are given in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 Statistics of participants by gender, ethnic origin, EMA status and parents' education level



The percentages shown are with respect to the total number of students excluding missing data for each group, which are: 3 for ethnic origin, 11 for EMA status and 43 for parents' education.

The majority (84%) of the students are white (225 out of 264; three missing data). The 39 students of other ethnic origins are 24 Chinese, 8 Indian/Pakistani, 2 Black, 3 of mixed origins, one Mauritian and one Irish.

1.2 Resit pattern

1.2.1 Resit pattern by college

Altogether 232 students decided to resit (88%). Two students from FC College did not indicate whether they were resitting or not. The resitting statistics by college are as given in Table 1.2.

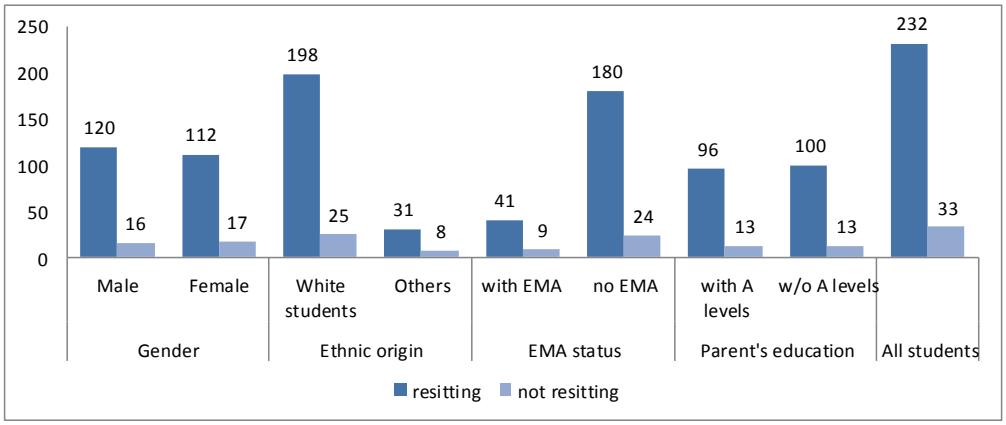
Table 1.2 Resit statistics by college

	SF College	FC College	IND College	All students
Resitting	43	93	96	232
Not resitting	13	2	18	33
% resitting	76.80%	97.90%	84.20%	87.50%

1.2.2 Resit pattern by gender, ethnic origin, EMA status and parents' education level

The resit numbers by different groups are shown in Figure 1.2. Slightly more male students than females chose to resit (88% vs. 86%), more white students chose to resit than students of other ethnic origins (88% vs. 80%), more students with no EMA chose to resit than students with EMA (87% vs. 82%) and slightly more students whose parents have A-level qualifications chose to resit than students whose parents do not have A levels (88% vs. 87%).

Figure 1.2 Statistics of resit numbers by gender, ethnic origin, EMA status and parents' education level



1.2.3 Resit pattern by number of subjects

The pattern of the number of subject-resits entered by the students is given below.

Table 1.3 Resit pattern by number of subjects resat

No. of subjects resat	Male		Female		All students	
	No. of students	%	No. of students	%	No. of students	%
1	40	33.3%	44	39.3%	84	36.2%
2	42	35.0%	46	41.1%	88	37.9%
3	37	30.8%	19	17.0%	56	24.1%
4	1	0.8%	3	2.7%	4	1.7%
Total	120	100.0%	112	100.0%	232	100.0%

The statistics in Table 1.3 refer to the numbers of students resitting different numbers of AS subjects, not individual units. The 232 students resat a total of 444 subjects; on average, they resat 1.9 subjects each.

1.2.4 Resit pattern by number of units

The students were asked to indicate on the questionnaire which units (showing total number) of the subject they were resitting. 50 students did not make any indication and for analysis purpose, it is assumed that the

student was resitting only one unit in the subject resat. With that assumption, the students resat on average 1.3 units per subject each. The majority of the resits were in January, about 16% were to be taken in June.

Table 1.4 Pattern of number of units resat per subject

No. of units resitting in the subject	No. of subjects	Total no. of units
Resitting one unit	344	344
Resitting two units	86	168
Resitting three units*	18	54
Total	446	566

*The students in the study were the last cohort of students taking 3 units in each AS/A2 module.

1.2.5 Resit pattern at grade boundaries

The grade pattern in the resits covered the entire range, from A to E, as shown in the following table:

Table 1.5 Resit pattern by original AS subject grades

AS Grade before the resit	%	Accumulative %
A	19.8	19.8
B	30.6	50.4
C	25.7	76.1
D	15.4	91.5
E	6.4	97.9
U	2.1	100

Half of the students resat the grade A/B boundary or had already got an A in their AS result. The relatively high proportion of students resitting at the upper grades was possibly due to the fact that the colleges in the research study were above average in the A levels league table (at top 10%, 30% and 60%).

1.2.6 Likelihood of students resitting between different groups

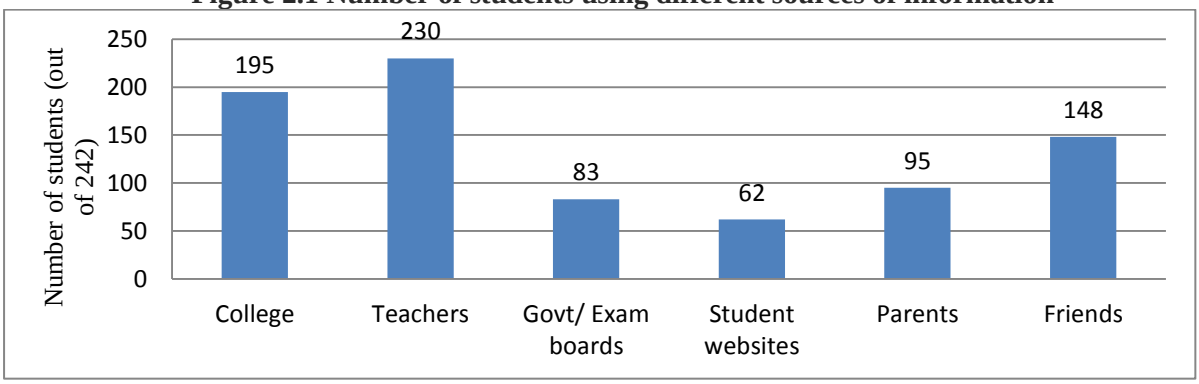
Chi-square tests were run to test the likelihood of resits between groups. Apart from colleges, no significant difference was found in the likelihood of students resitting between groups in different categories.

1. *Between college*
   The result of the chi-square test indicates a significant difference in the likelihood of students choosing to resit from one college to another (chi-square=16.749; df=2, p=0.000). This is not surprising given the much higher resit percentage for the FE College. However, only AS resits in Year 13 were included; they did not include resits already taken in Year 12 or possible A2 resits in June in Year 13.
2. *Between gender*
   No significant difference was found in the likelihood of students resitting between male and female students (chi-square=0.121; df=2, p=0.728).
3. *Between subjects* (only those with sufficient students taking the subject pairs were analyzed)
   No significant difference was found in the likelihood of students resitting between subjects; e.g. between students of Mathematics and students of History (chi-square=0.161; df=2, p=0.688), or between Mathematics and English (chi-square=0.066; df=2, p=0.797), or Psychology and Chemistry (chi-square=0.727; df=2, p=0.394).
4. *Between groups of different EMA, ethnic origin, parents' education level*
   Chi-square tests were also run for the likelihood of resits between groups based on other variables and no significant of difference was found in the likelihood of resitting in any of the groups: ethnic origin (white students vs. non-white): chi-square=2.609; df=2, p=0.106; EMA (EMA vs. no-EMA): chi-square=1.381; df=2, p=0.240; parents qualifications (with AL vs. without AL): chi-square=0.10; df=2, p=0.922.

2 Information about the resit system

Six sources of information are given on the questionnaire and students were asked to indicate which ones they used to find out about resits and how useful the information was to them. 25 students did not indicate any. Of the remaining 242, the vast majority (95%) used information provided by their teachers. Student websites had the lowest usage. Interestingly, more students used information provided by their friends than information from their parents or government/exam boards. The full statistics are given in Figure 2.1.

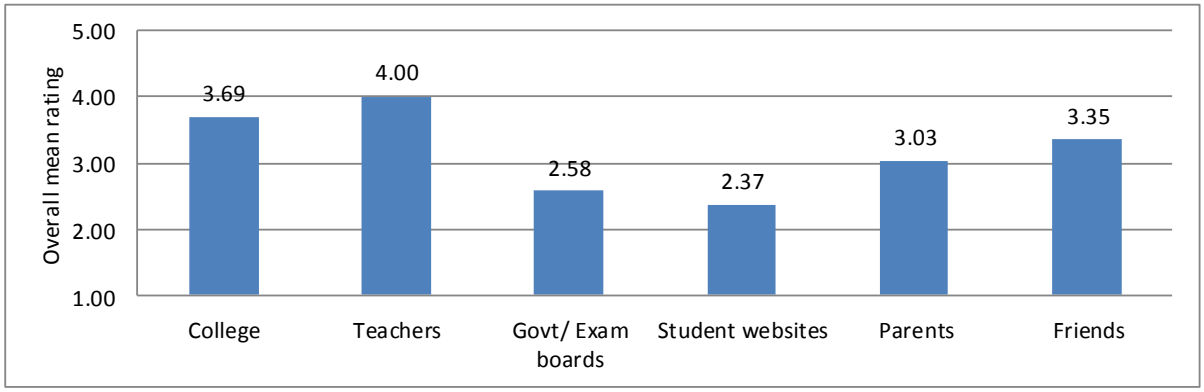
Figure 2.1 Number of students using different sources of information



Students were asked to rate the usefulness of the information they used on a 5-point scale. The results are given in Figure 2.2. Information provided by teachers has the highest rating and information on student websites, the lowest.

Figure 2.2 Students' ratings of the usefulness of the different information sources

(Rating: 5 = extremely useful; 1 = not at all useful)



In general, there was no significant difference between different groups in the ratings of the information used.

Table 2.1 Ratings of the usefulness of different information sources by students of different groups

(Rating: 5 = extremely useful; 1 = not at all useful)

Information source:		College	Teachers	Govt/ Exam board	Student websites	Parents	Friends
Gender	Male	3.76	4.05	2.44	2.24	3.06	3.51
	Female	3.63	3.96	2.71	2.52	3.00	3.16
Ethnic origin	White students	3.67	3.97	2.59	2.33	3.09	3.28
	Others	3.81	4.23	2.50	2.42	2.62	3.68
EMA status	with EMA	3.59	3.86	2.50	1.83	2.71	3.54
	w/o EMA	3.73	4.07	2.53	2.52	3.11	3.33
Parents' education	w/ A-levels	3.69	3.98	2.53	2.50	3.25	3.27
	w/o A-levels	3.72	4.03	2.63	2.26	2.73	3.45
College	SF College	3.57	3.81	2.44	2.00	2.40	2.86
	FE College	3.48	3.93	2.39	2.35	3.11	3.52
	IND College	3.94	4.17	2.82	2.67	3.30	3.48
All students		3.69	4.00	2.58	2.37	3.03	3.35

3 Students' knowledge of the resit rules

Students were asked four questions on the questionnaire about their knowledge of the resit rules:

Question 1 – How many times can an A-level student resit a particular A/AS unit?
Question 2 – How many units in each A/AS subject can an A-level student resit altogether?
Question 3 – Who pays the resit exam fee?
Question 4 – What happens to the resit result?

The answers to questions 1 and 2 are "no limit" (on the assumption of 3 units per subject and 4 exams in total between Years 12 and 13, answers of at least three are accepted as correct for these two questions). The answer to question 3 is "the student" (193 students chose this) or "the parents" (73 chose this). The majority of the students knew the answer to question 4, which is that the resit result would replace the old result if it is better.

The analyses in Tables 3.1 and 3.2 indicate that the students had a good general understanding of resits. 45% of the students answered all four questions correctly. The average number of correct answers is 3. Questions 1 and 2 had the lowest correct answers.

Table 3.1 Percentages of students answering individual questions correctly

	No. of students	% of all students
Qn.1 correct	156	58.4%
Qn.2 correct	175	65.5%
Qn.3 correct	250	93.6%
Qn.4 correct	234	87.6%

Table 3.2 Statistics of students' correct answers about the resit rule

Student answering:	No. of students	% of all students	Cumulative %
4 questions correct	121	45.3%	45.3%
3 questions correct	64	24.0%	69.3%
2 questions correct	60	22.5%	91.8%
1 question correct	16	6.0%	97.8%
no question correct	6	2.2%	100.0%
All students	267	100.0%	100.0%

4 The resit decision process

4.1 Timing of resit decision

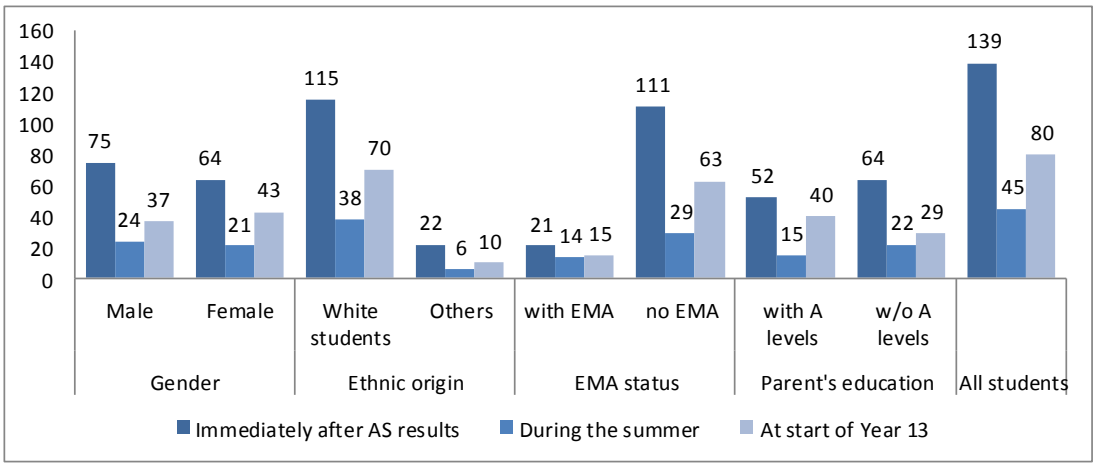
The students were asked when they made their minds up about registering for January resits in Year 13. Over half of the students (53%) decided whether to resit or not immediately after they received their AS results at the end of Year 12. About 17% decided during the summer and 30% decided at the start of Year 13. The pattern was very similar between students of different colleges, as shown in Table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1 Timing of resit decision by students from each college

Percentage of students:	SF College	FE College	IND College	All students
Immediately after AS results	58.2	48.5	53.6	52.7
During the summer	16.4	19.6	15.2	17.0
At start of Year 13	25.5	32.0	31.1	30.3

The statistics of different groups are summarised in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 Numbers of students making resit decisions at different times

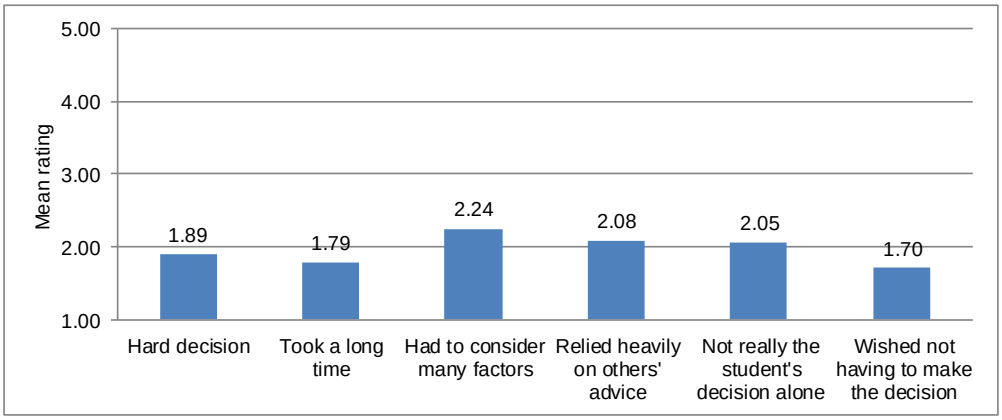


In general, female students, white students, students with no EMA and students whose parents have A-level qualifications seemed to be slightly slower in making their decisions, but not by much.

4.2 Easiness of the resit decision

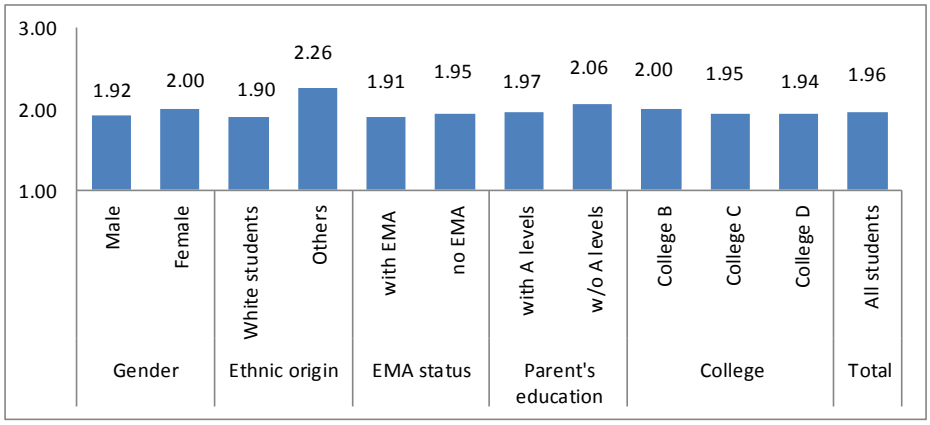
As regards the difficulty or easiness of the decision itself, the students were asked to rate each of five statements on a 5-point scale. The statements were designed in such a way that a high rating (5 means the statement is extremely accurate) indicates a difficult process. Overall, the students seemed to have found the resit decision process very easy.

Figure 4.2 Students' ratings of the difficulty of the resit decision
(Ratings from 1 to 5; a higher rating indicates a more difficult process)



The overall mean rating (inclusive of all statements in the ratings) for the whole sample was 1.96. There is not much difference between the different groups; the ratings were all very low, i.e. an easy process for all the students regardless of their background. The overall mean ratings are summarised in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3 Ratings of the difficulty of the resit decision by students of different groups
(Ratings from 1 to 5; a higher rating indicates a more difficult process)



The full rating details by individual groups are given in Table 4.2 below. They were all low.

Table 4.2 Ratings of different aspects of the resit decision by students of different groups

Rating of each decision statement (5 = statement extremely accurate; 1 = statement not at all accurate)		Hard decision	Took a long time	Had to consider many factors	Relied heavily on others' advice	Not really own decision alone	Wished not having to decide
Gender	Male	1.82	1.70	2.24	2.02	2.04	1.73
	Female	1.96	1.88	2.25	2.15	2.06	1.68
Ethnic origin	White students	1.83	1.72	2.13	2.06	1.99	1.69
	Others	2.25	2.19	2.91	2.23	2.42	1.57
EMA status	with EMA	1.93	1.78	2.26	1.93	1.80	1.74
	w/o EMA	1.86	1.77	2.21	2.10	2.10	1.68
Parents' education	w/ A-levels	1.89	1.80	2.20	2.08	2.12	1.75
	w/o A-levels	1.99	1.90	2.44	2.26	2.10	1.68
College	SF College	2.02	1.79	2.11	2.06	1.91	2.13
	FE College	1.85	1.81	2.30	2.04	1.97	1.73
	IND College	1.85	1.76	2.26	2.13	2.19	1.46
All students		1.89	1.79	2.24	2.08	2.05	1.70

4.3 Parental influence

65% (172/265; 2 missing data) of the students talked to their parents about whether to resit or not. The statistics by different groups are given in Table 4.3 below.

Table 4.3 Statistics of students of different groups talking to their parents about resits

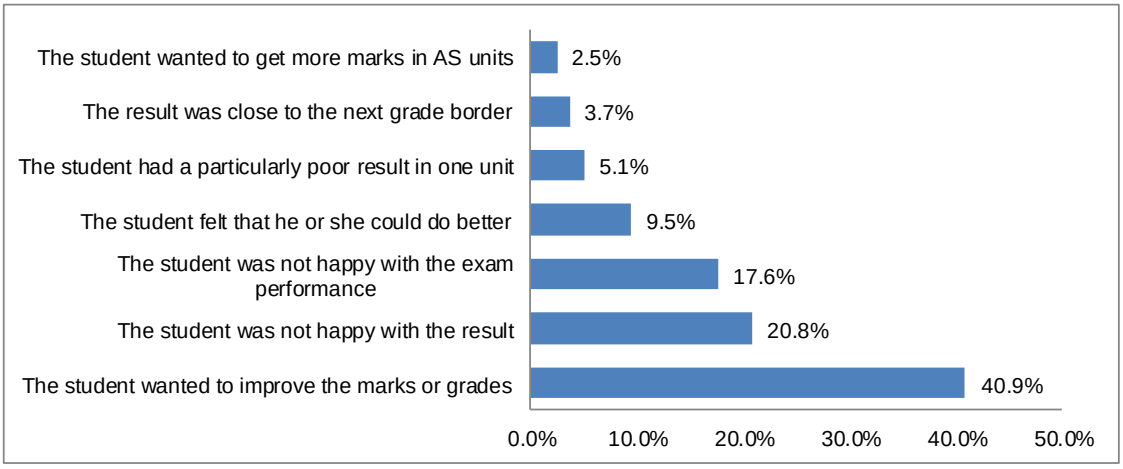
	Gender		Ethnic origin		EMA status		Parents' education		College			All students
	Male	Female	White students	Others	with EMA	no EMA	with A levels	w/o A levels	SF College	FE College	IND College	
No. who talked to parents	91	81	147	22	28	138	72	85	33	72	67	172
% of no. in the group	67.4%	62.3%	65.6%	57.9%	56.0%	67.6%	66.1%	73.9%	58.9%	74.2%	59.8%	64.9%

5 Reasons for resitting or not

5.1 Reasons for resitting

The students were asked to give their reasons for resitting against each resit subject. The reasons given by the 232 students who decided to resit were grouped into seven categories and summarized in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 Students' reasons for resitting



5.2 Reasons for not resitting

33 students decided not to resit. One did not give a reason and of the 32 who did, 26 (81%) were satisfied with their result, 4 were concerned with A2 workload and the other two did not want to 'bother' resitting.

6 Teachers' advice

55 students (21%) did not enter anything about their teachers' advice to them individually as to whether they should resit or not (44 resitting, 9 not resitting and 2 who did not indicate whether they were resitting or not). The amount of missing data was fairly high. It could be due to the open format which required some effort from the students. On the other hand, it could also be that no advice was given by.

Teachers' advice was analyzed separately for students who were resitting and those who were not.

6.1 Advice given to students who decided not to resit

Of the 33 students who were not resitting, 9 did not write anything about their teachers' advice. The advice as described by the other 24 students are summarised in Table 6.1 below.

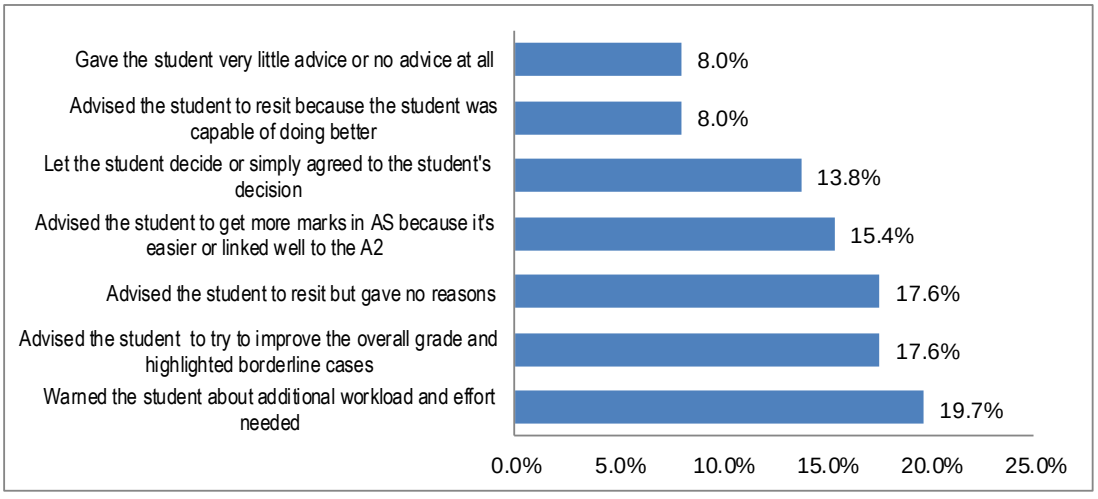
Table 6.1 Teachers' advice as entered by the students who decided not to resit

Teacher's advice	No. of students	% of advice
Did not give any advice to the student	2	8.3%
Said there was no need to resit	9	37.5%
Advised student about other considerations (A2, work)	3	12.5%
Left it up to the student	3	12.5%
Advised the student to resit	2	8.3%
The student said he did not ask for any	5	20.8%

6.2 Advice given to students who decided to resit

The teachers' advice, as described by the 188 students resitting, was broadly grouped into seven categories, and presented in Figure 6.1 below.

Figure 6.1 Teachers' advice as entered by the students who decided to resit

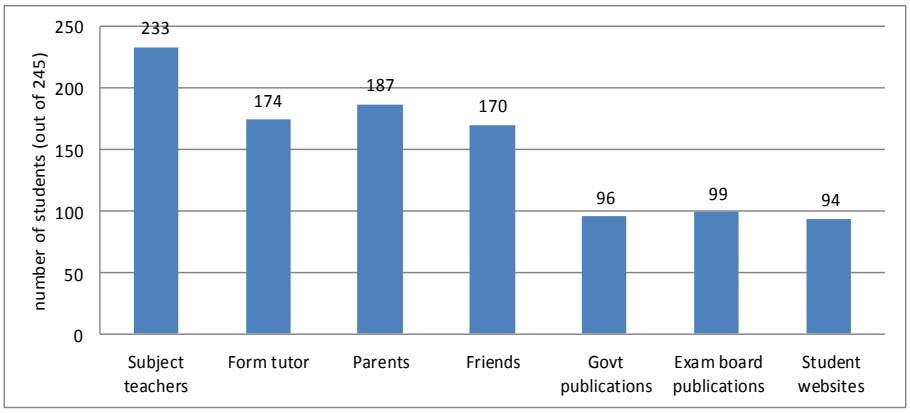


About 60 per cent of the students' descriptions of their teachers' advice was constructive, with the teachers explaining the reason for their advice and mentioning factors the students should consider before resitting. The other 40 per cent was much less helpful, with little or no advice, or simply leaving the decision to the students.

7 Advice sought/received by students for their resit decision

Students were asked what advice they had sought or used when deciding whether to resit or not. 22 students did not enter anything in this section, i.e. missing data for all items. The statistics given in Figure 7.1 suggest that the vast majority of the students sought or received advice from their subject teachers (95%). Slightly surprisingly, more students sought or received advice from their parents (76%) rather than from their form tutors (71%). 69% of the students said they used advice from their friends.

Figure 7.1 Number of students using advice from different sources in the resit decision

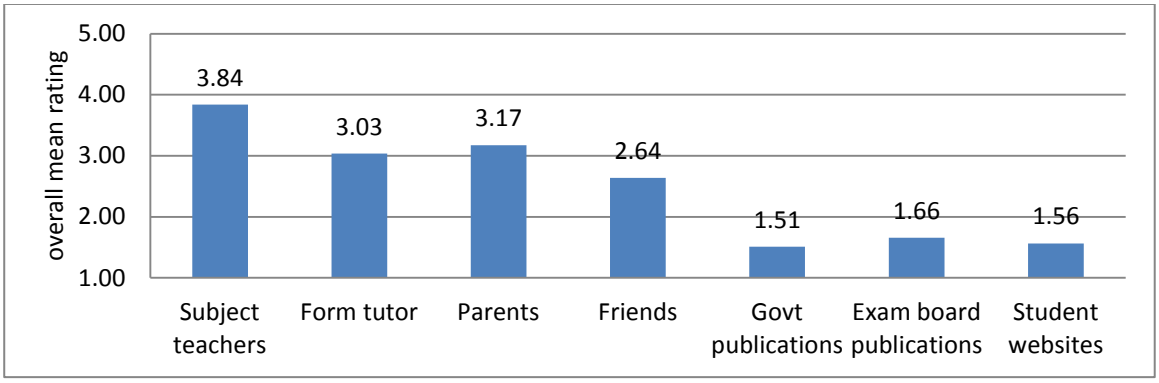


The students were asked to rate how influential individual advice was in their resit decisions. The results are given in Figure 7.2.

None of the advice was rated particularly high, all below 4 on the 5-point scale. The advice of subject teachers was rated the most influential, at 3.84. Interestingly, advice given by form tutors was rated less influential than that of the parents. Advice given in government and exam board publications and on student websites were all rated very low, below 2.

Figure 7.2 Students' ratings of the importance of different advice in their resit decision

(Rating: 5 = extremely influential; 1 = not at all influential)



In general, the ratings are fairly similar between the different groups and the three colleges. The detailed statistics are given in Table 7.1 below.

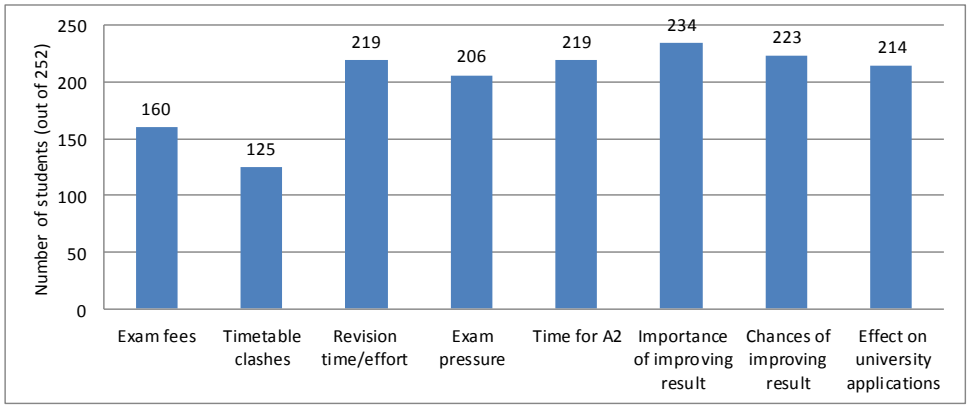
Table 7.1 Ratings by students of different groups of the importance of different advice in resit decisions

Advice from:		Subject teachers	Form tutor	Parents	Friends	Govt. publications	Exam board publications	Student websites
Gender	Male	3.83	3.04	3.13	2.48	1.40	1.57	1.56
	Female	3.84	3.03	3.21	2.80	1.69	1.79	1.57
Ethnic origin	White students	3.78	3.01	3.14	2.51	1.48	1.63	1.48
	Others	4.17	3.20	3.32	3.32	1.71	1.81	2.07
EMA status	with EMA	3.65	3.09	2.97	2.55	1.50	1.52	1.40
	w/o EMA	3.88	3.04	3.20	2.64	1.49	1.68	1.59
Parents' education	w/ A-levels	3.73	3.03	3.27	2.66	1.45	1.69	1.53
	w/o A-levels	4.01	3.22	3.29	2.76	1.63	1.75	1.64
College	SF College	3.72	2.80	3.06	2.38	1.52	1.70	1.57
	FE College	3.79	3.26	3.25	2.85	1.62	1.81	1.75
	IND College	3.93	2.93	3.15	2.57	1.39	1.49	1.38
All students		3.84	3.03	3.17	2.64	1.51	1.66	1.56

8 Factors in the students' resit decision

The students were asked whether they used or considered each of eight factors when deciding whether to resit or not. 15 students did not enter anything in this section, i.e. missing data for all factors.

Figure 8.1 Number of students using different factors in the resit decision

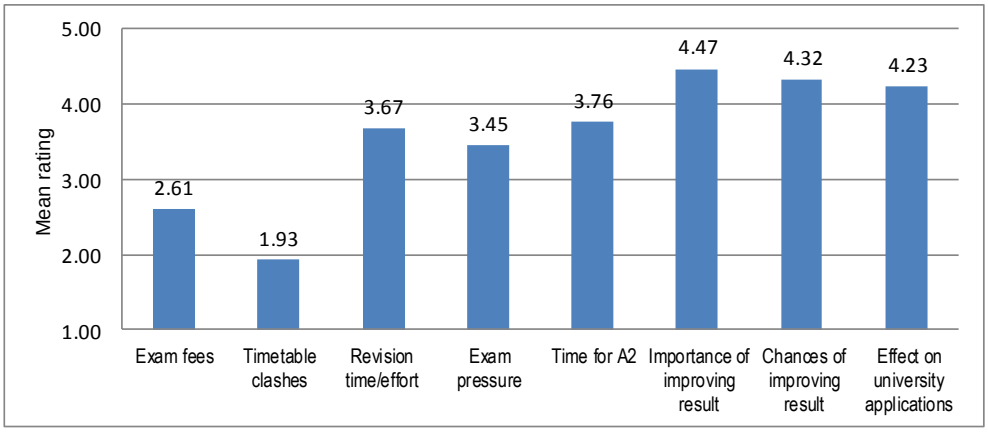


Only 50 per cent of the students considered the factor of timetable-clash (64% for the exam-fees factor), whereas all the other factors were considered by over 80 per cent of the students.

The students were asked to rate each factor in terms of how influential that factor was in their resit decisions.

Figure 8.2 Students' ratings of the importance of different factors in their resit decision

(Rating: 5 = extremely influential; 1 = not at all influential)



Again, timetable-clash was given the lowest rating, at 1.9 on the 5-point scale. Exams fees did not seem to be a concern either, with a rating below 3. The most important factors were the importance of improvement, the chances of improvement and the effect on university applications, all rated above 4.

In general, there was no significant difference in the ratings of the individual factors between different groups. Not surprisingly, students with EMA rated exam fees a bit higher than those with no EMA, but the mean rating was still only average, at 3.05. The detailed results are given in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1 Ratings by students of different groups of the importance of different factors in resit decisions

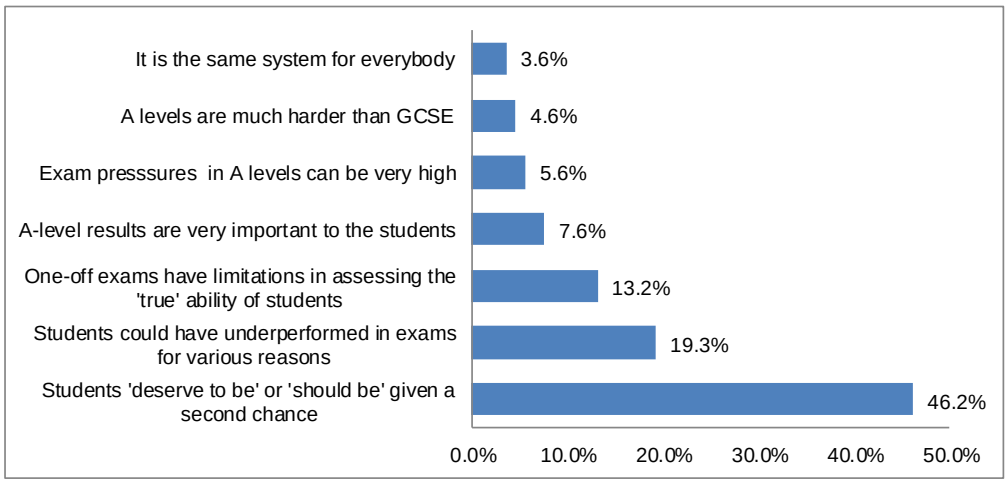
Factors:		Exam fees	Timetable clashes	Revision time/ effort	Exam pressure	Time for A2	Importance of improving result	Chances of improving result	Effect on university applications
Gender	Male	2.57	2.07	3.59	3.33	3.66	4.52	4.38	4.24
	Female	2.64	1.73	3.74	3.56	3.85	4.42	4.25	4.21
Ethnic origin	White students	2.65	1.86	3.59	3.40	3.70	4.47	4.34	4.18
	Others	2.48	2.29	4.10	3.65	4.06	4.50	4.21	4.47
EMA status	with EMA	3.05	1.96	3.83	3.64	3.77	4.47	4.17	4.06
	w/o EMA	2.50	1.93	3.63	3.39	3.75	4.45	4.33	4.24
Parents' education	w/ A-levels	2.44	1.93	3.77	3.62	3.86	4.52	4.38	4.09
	w/o A-levels	2.80	2.02	3.66	3.43	3.77	4.42	4.28	4.28
College	SF College	2.60	2.00	3.84	3.70	3.82	4.39	4.38	4.09
	FE College	2.83	1.70	3.43	3.38	3.65	4.48	4.35	4.28
	IND College	2.38	2.09	3.78	3.38	3.81	4.50	4.26	4.26
All students		2.61	1.93	3.67	3.45	3.76	4.47	4.32	4.23

9 Fairness of the resit system

249 students (94%; 249/264) thought that the resit system was fair; 15 thought it was not fair and three did not answer the question.

Of the students who thought the system is fair, 52 did not give a reason. The reasons given by the other 197 students were broadly grouped into seven categories and summarized in Figure 9.1.

Figure 9.1 Students' reasons as to why the resit system is fair



As for the 15 students who thought the system was not fair, three did not give a reason and the reasons of the other 12 are summarised in Table 9.1 below.

Table 9.1 Students' reasons as to why the resit system is not fair

Reason why the resit system is not fair	No. of students
It is unfair to the students who had worked hard and got good results the first time	7
It would be more difficult for universities to discriminate between students	2
It is difficult for students to choose whether to resit or not	1
The resit fees may be too expensive for some students	2

10 Continuation of the resit system

The students were asked whether they wanted the resit system to continue. 242 (94%; 242/256) wanted it to continue; 14 did not, and 11 did not give an answer. The vast majority of those who thought the system was fair wanted it to continue; some of those who thought the system was not fair also wanted to it to continue. The statistics are given in Table 11.1.

Table 10.1 Students' answers about "fairness" and "continuation" of the resit system

	The system is fair	The system is not fair	Missing data (on fairness)	Total
want to system to continue	237	4	0	241
do not want the system to continue	4	10	0	14
missing data (on continuation)	8	1	3	12
Total*	249	15	3	267

Three choices were given on the questionnaire for the students to choose from as to why they wanted the resit system to continue or not (more than one choice could be ticked).

For the 242 students who wanted the system to continue, five did not choose any reasons. The choices of reasons selected by the other 237 students were fairly evenly spread, with slightly more choosing the third reason , as shown in Table 10.2.

Table 10.2 Students' reasons for wanting the resit system to continue

The number of reasons ticked:	No. of students
ticked one reason only	98
ticked two reasons	36
ticked three reasons	103
did not tick any	5

Reason:	No. of students who ticked it	Percentage of all reasons ticked
because it is fair	164	29.9%
because A levels are important and students should be given another chance to improve them.	148	27.0%
because some students may not perform their best in their first attempts due to various reasons.	237	43.2%

The reasons chosen by the 14 students who did not want the resit system to continue are given in Table 10.3.

Table 10.3 Students' reasons for not wanting the resit system to continue

The number of reasons ticked:	No. of students
ticked one reason only	10
ticked two reasons	2
ticked three reasons	1
did not tick any	1

Reason:	No. of students who ticked it	Percentage of all reasons ticked
because it is not fair	5	29.4%
because it places too much emphasis on exams over other sixth-form activities.	1	5.9%
because some students may not take their first exam attempts seriously.	11	64.7%

Only 6% of the students used the 'over-emphasis on exams' as the reason for not wanting resits in the system. For most (65%), the reason was that the students might not take their first attempts seriously.

11 Universities and employers

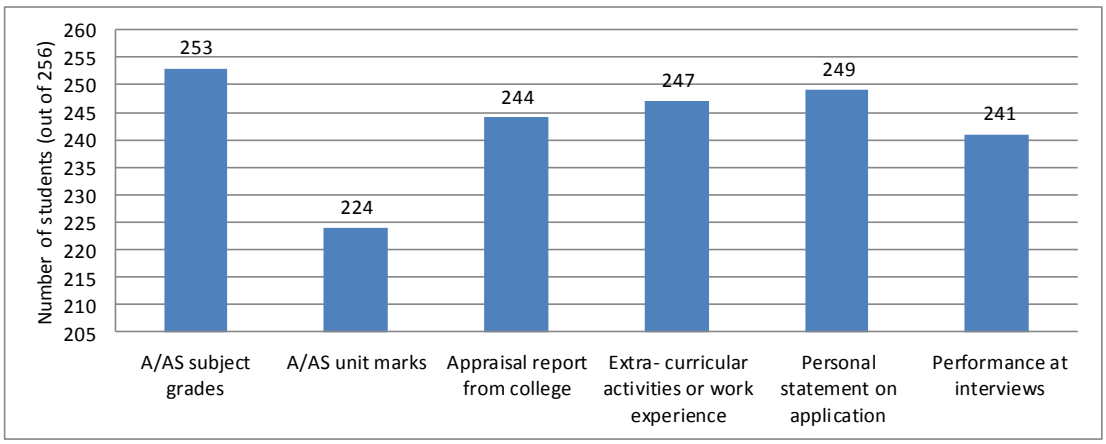
11.1 Post-Year 13 plan

256 students (98%; 256/262) indicated that they wanted to go to university after Year 13. Six wanted to go to work, including joining the police or RAF, and five did not give an answer.

11.2 Factors considered by universities and employers for selections

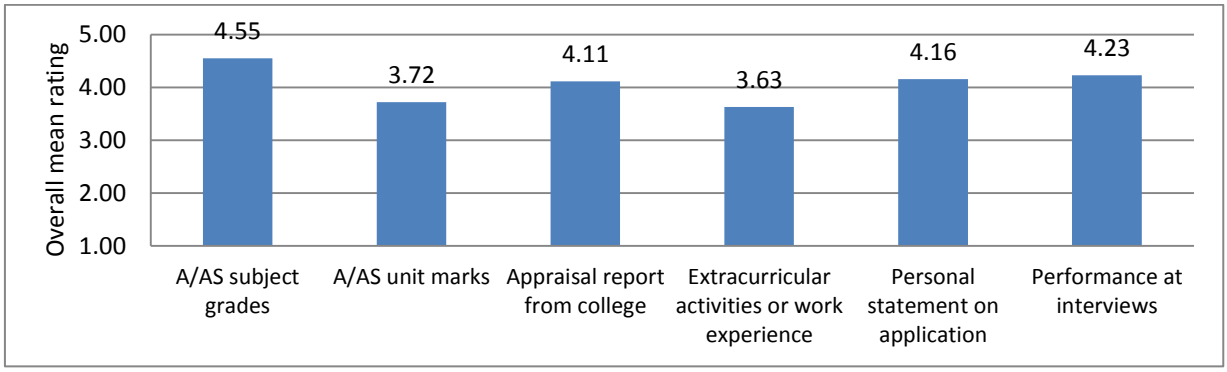
The students were given six factor on the questionnaire and asked which of them they thought universities and employers would take into account when selecting candidates. 11 students did not enter anything in this section (i.e. missing data for all factors). The statistics of the rest are summarised in Figure 11.1.

Figure 11.1 Number of students considering different factors in universities/employers' selections



The students were asked to rate what they thought the importance of each factor was to universities and employers. The results are given in Figure 11.2. All factors were rated fairly high, with A/AS subject grades being rated the highest, at 4.6 on the 5-point scale.

Figure 11.2 Students' ratings of the importance of different factors in universities' selections
(Rating: 5 = extremely influential; 1 = not at all influential)



The results of the ratings of the individual factors by different groups are given in Table 11.1. On the whole, the rating patterns were fairly similar.

Table 11.1 Ratings of the importance of different factors in universities' selections by different groups
(Rating: 5 = extremely important; 1 = not at all important)

Factors:		A/AS subject grades	A/AS unit marks	Appraisal report from college	Extracurricular activities or work experience	Personal statement on application	Performance at interviews
Gender	Male	4.58	3.76	4.12	3.64	4.15	4.27
	Female	4.51	3.68	4.10	3.62	4.17	4.19
Ethnic origin	White students	4.58	3.68	4.11	3.64	4.16	4.22
	Others	4.42	4.03	4.16	3.61	4.19	4.31
EMA status	with EMA	4.56	3.65	4.00	3.52	4.14	4.19
	w/o EMA	4.55	3.73	4.13	3.66	4.16	4.24
Parents' education	w/ A-levels	4.62	3.76	4.17	3.64	4.03	4.25
	w/o A-levels	4.50	3.67	4.14	3.70	4.22	4.19
College	SF College	4.60	3.53	4.09	3.57	4.04	3.90
	FE College	4.53	3.85	4.09	3.70	4.09	4.18
	IND College	4.54	3.72	4.14	3.60	4.27	4.44
All students		4.55	3.72	4.11	3.63	4.16	4.23

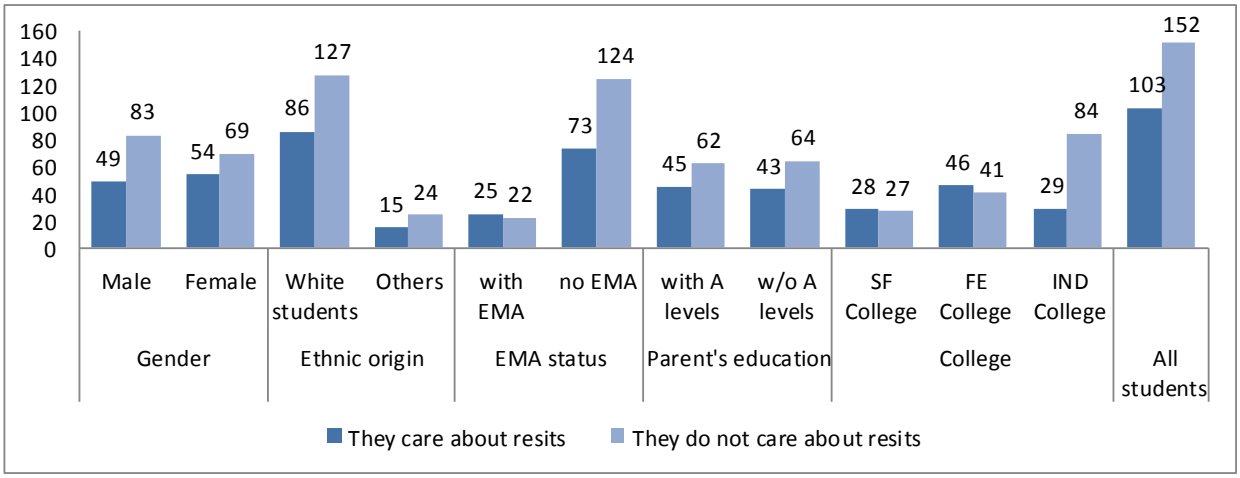
11.3 Whether universities and employers care about resits

The students were asked whether they thought universities and employers would take into account in their selections whether the candidates had resat some A/AS units or not.

60% (152/255; 12 missing data) of the students thought that universities and employers did not care. Fairly similar statistics were found in each group, with more students thinking that universities and employers did not care about resits than those who thought they did (except the EMA group, which is about 50-50). 63% of the boys thought they do not care compared to 57% among the girls.

The biggest difference is between the colleges. Three-quarters (74%) of the students from IND College thought that universities did not care, whereas the corresponding proportion for both the SF College and the FE College was only about half. The full statistics are given in Figure 11.3.

Figure 11.3 Number of students who thought universities/employers care/not care about resits



84 students did not give a reason as to why they thought universities care or not care about resits. The reasons given by the other 183 students were analyzed separately for those who thought universities care (73) and those who thought they do not care (110), as shown in Figures 11.4 and 11.5 respectively.

Figure 11.4 Students' reasons as to why universities care about resits

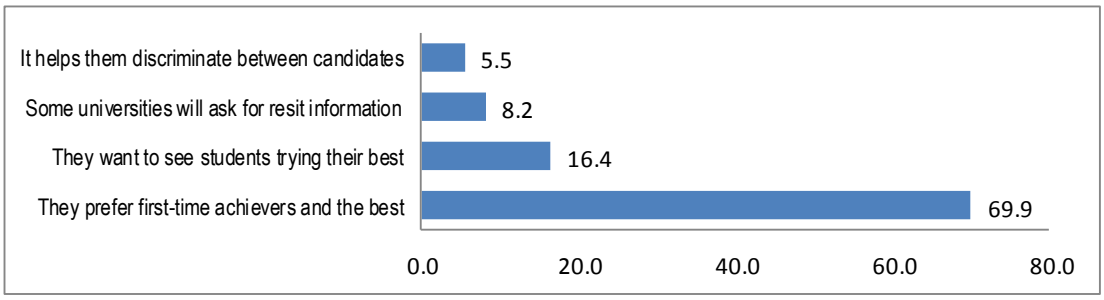
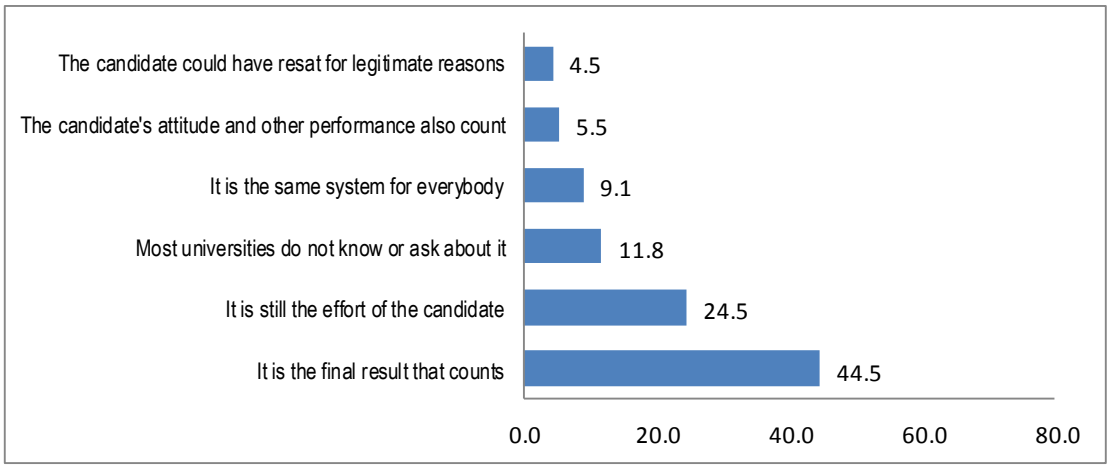


Figure 11.5 Students' reasons as to why universities do not care about resits

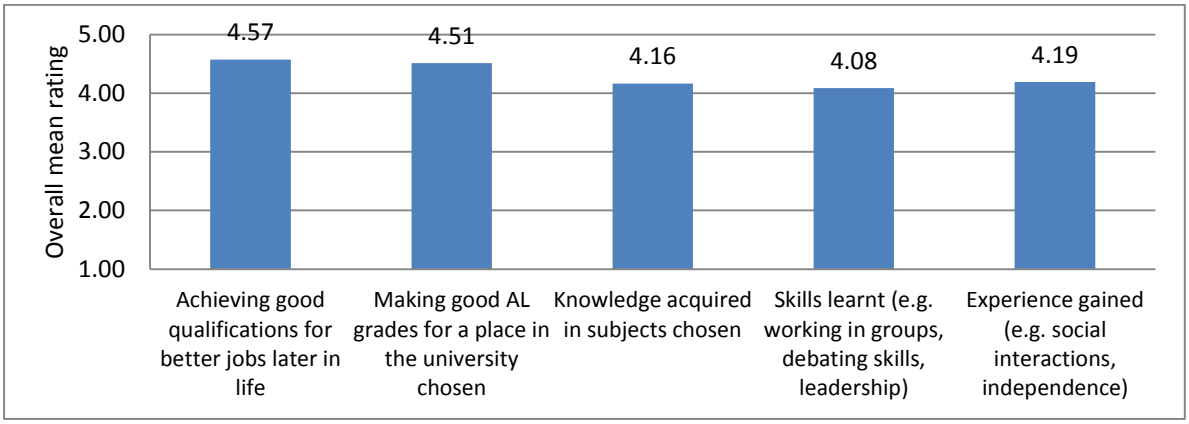


12 Different aspects of sixth-form education

In the final question of the questionnaire, students were asked to rate the importance of each of five aspects of sixth-form education on a 5-point scale. The results are given in Figure 12.1. Not surprisingly, achieving good results for a place in university and better jobs later in life had the highest ratings, at 4.6 and 4.5 respectively. The other aspects including knowledge acquired, skills learnt and experience gained were all rated slightly lower but still high, at around 4.1.

Figure 12.1 Students' ratings of the importance of different aspects of sixth-form education

(Rating: 5 = extremely important; 1 = not at all important)



On the whole, there is no significant difference between the ratings by different groups. The detailed statistics are given in Table 12.1.

Table 12.1 Ratings of importance of different aspects of sixth-form education by different groups

(Rating: 5 = extremely important; 1 = not at all important)

Factors:		Achieving good qualifications for better jobs later in life	Making good AL grades for a place in the university chosen	Knowledge acquired in subjects chosen	Skills learnt (e.g. working in groups, debating skills, leadership)	Experience gained (e.g. social interactions, independence)
Gender	Male	4.56	4.48	4.19	4.07	4.19
	Female	4.58	4.54	4.13	4.09	4.20
Ethnic origin	White students	4.59	4.50	4.17	4.07	4.20
	Others	4.50	4.56	4.11	4.16	4.13
EMA status	with EMA	4.51	4.29	4.09	4.09	4.28
	w/o EMA	4.59	4.57	4.18	4.08	4.18
Parents' education	w/ A-levels	4.52	4.48	4.16	4.04	4.21
	w/o A-levels	4.61	4.54	4.23	4.19	4.20
College	SF College	4.46	4.47	4.00	3.96	3.91
	FE College	4.63	4.47	4.25	4.11	4.27
	IND College	4.57	4.56	4.17	4.13	4.27
All students		4.57	4.51	4.16	4.08	4.19

Appendix 14

Interview Schedule

Basic Schedule for Students – 1st Interview

1. About the student

To start, can you tell me a bit more about yourself?
Why did you want to continue to sixth-form after GCSE?
How did you choose your subjects in sixth-form?
How do you find A levels compared to GCSE so far?
What kind of a student are you? How do you describe yourself as a sixth-form student?
Apart from getting some A level qualifications, what else do you want to get out of the two years of sixth-form education?

2. Knowledge about resit

Do you think you have a good understanding of the resit rule?
Do you think you need to understand the rule before making a decision as to resit or not?
Can you tell me what sort of guidelines your college have about resits? Is there any document or general briefing? What is the general advice?
How did your teachers tell you and your classmates about resits? Did they brief you individually or was it done in the class as a whole?
Apart from your college or teachers, where else did you learn about resits?

3. The resit decision

How did you think you did in the AS exam last year?
Were you happy with your AS results generally?
I understand that you have decided to resit in January (name subjects).
Was that an easy decision? What made it so easy (or difficult)?

Did you talk to your parents? What is their attitude towards you resitting?
I assume your parents paid for the resits? Was exam fee an issue?

Do you have a specific target grade or mark that you want to achieve in the resit?
What makes you think you will be able to get a better result in the resit?
What advice did your teachers give you? What factors did you consider in deciding to resit?

From the questionnaire, I understand that you plan to go to university.
Is the result you are aiming at in the resit related to a course you want to study in university?
What course is that? Do you know its requirements?

Will you indicate on the UCAS form that you'll be resitting some modules? Why, or why not?
What makes you think that universities care (or do not care) about results based on resits?

4. Preparation for the resits

Let me turn to timing. What is your reason for wanting to resit the modules in January?
How do you plan to revise for the resit?
Did you do any revision during the summer? When do you plan to start revising for the resit?
Having sat the exam before, how do you find that experience in preparing you for the resit?
What kind of help does you college or teachers give you in preparation for the resits? (Any study leave, tutorial time, practice with past exam papers?)
Are they the same kind of help you were given when you sat those modules in the first exam?
How do you find having to resit in January interfere with your A2 study so far?

5. Sixth-form education in general

You indicated on the questionnaire that you think allowing students to resit is fair (or not fair) because (student's reason on the questionnaire). Can you tell me a bit more about that?
What do you think is the reason for some students being performing their best the first time round?
What makes you think that there should be second chances in A levels?
Do you think there should be a limit to the number of resits? Why?

What is your view about some reports saying that A-level results maybe getting better because students are allowed to resit without penalty?
What is your view about the suggestion that the A levels have become too exam-driven?

What extracurricular activities do you do in sixth-form?
If you don't have to resit, will you be doing more extracurricular activities or more studying?

Let us look at sixth-form education as a whole.
What do you think is the purpose of sixth-form education?
What is your view about the educational aspects other than getting the qualifications to go to universities? (the aspects given on the questionnaire: knowledge, skills, experience)
How do you see the resit system fit in the sixth-form education in terms of its educational purpose?

Finally, are there any questions or any other things you want to talk about regarding your resit decision or the resit system in general?

Thank you.

Interview Schedule

Basic Schedule for Students - 2nd Interview

Please remind me what exams you resat in January?
Did you do any A2 exams in January?
How do you think you did in the exams?

Why do you think you did better (or worse) this time than last year?
What about your understanding of the subject (also, exam requirements, etc.) this time?
You mentioned in the first interview that the previous exam experience would probably help (not help), did you find it so in the resit?
Does learning the A2 modules help with the resit? How?
How did you find the revision, harder than you thought or was it okay?
How did you revise? (past papers?, notes?)
When did you start serious revision?
Did you get any help from your or college or teacher regarding preparation for the resit?
Did your teacher give you any advice as to how to revise for the resit?

Have you got any university offers?
Do you mind telling me what their conditions are?
Are you confident in meeting the conditions?
Do you think universities care about whether you have taken resits or not?

Will you consider resitting some other modules in June?
Did you find the resits, all the revision, exam-taking, etc. affect your A2 study at all?

We mentioned your parents briefly in the last interview.
Do you mind telling me a bit more about your relationship with them?
Do you discuss your education with them at all, such as what subjects to choose, which university to go for, revision plans, etc.?
How do you think they advise you? From experience, knowledge, common sense?

Do you find these two years of education being driven by exams most of the time?
Do you think you have learnt well under the modular system? How does it work?

How is your study going so far, now only 4 months away from the final exams in June?
Are you enjoying sixth-form education in college? Do you still do extracurricular activities?
Do you think it was a right decision to have resat the exams?
Do you still think the resit system is fair (not fair)?
What is your outlook for the next few months?

Finally, are there any questions or any other things you want to talk about regarding your resit experience or the resit system in general?

Thank you.

Interview Schedule

Basic Schedule for Students – 3rd Interview

In this interview, I want to go over with you the whole resit experience that you had earlier this year.

First, please tell me the units you have resat in January and their results?
Were they better, worse, or the same as the previous results?

Last October, when you decided to resit these units in January, what was your main reason for resitting? (e.g. improve results, need to get better grades, know can do better)

In making that decision, what was your main concern or consideration?
Was there any worries for you in taking up the additional exam? (e.g. not enough time, impact on A2, how possible it is to improve, how important it is to improve)
Now that you have done it, do you think you were right about those concerns?
Was there a difference in the way you approach the exam this time, how you revise or prepare for it, from the first time you took it last year?

Why do you think you did worse (or better/same) in the resit?
(e.g. more revision, more practice on past papers, better understanding the exam structure or what the examiners' requirement better, better timing, etc. – ask the student to elaborate)

Do you think taking exams is a good or bad way to learn? How does it help you learn?

Do you think that you have learnt more or something new about your subject in resitting it, something you did not pick up when you first sat the exam?
Why and in what way?

Do you think resitting exams has interfered with your study generally, in terms of:
spending time on the A2 modules and extracurricular activities,
developing skills not related to exam-taking, or
what you expected to get out of sixth-form education generally?

With hindsight, do you think it was a right decision to resit? Why?
What do you think you have achieved or learned out of resitting?

If you think back nearly two years ago, why did you go into sixth-form in the first place?
What do you want to get out of it? Do you think the resit system has helped you achieve that?

Finally, are there any questions or any other things you want to talk about regarding your resit experience or the resit system in general?

Thank you.

Interview Schedule

Basic Schedule for Teachers

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.

First, can you tell me what subjects you teach in sixth-form?

Can you tell me a bit about the structure in your college?
(Say, how do subject teachers work with form tutors, heads of subjects, faculty heads, etc.?)

Do you teach the same students for Year 12 and Year 13? (both AS and A2)

How do the students choose their subjects at the start of Year 12?
Do you think they choose your subject out of interest or what they think they are good at?

When do the students start taking their first AS exams in your college? Was it January or June in Year 12? Is there a general policy in your college about this? What is the rationale for it?

Is it common for students who took their first exam in January to resit them in June?
I assume that teaching of a unit or module has completed before students take their exam; what do you think about the time for teaching (sufficient or not; same for every student)?

Do you think it is better for the students to take the resits in June or January?
Do you think some teachers use the January exams as mocks?

<u>Knowledge about resits</u>

When you first meet the students of your class in Year 12, what do you usually tell them in terms of expectations for sixth-form education?
Do you mention the examination system, specifically the modular system and the resit arrangements? Why or why not?

When do you think the students generally know about the possibility of resits?
Do they ask any questions about resits at all; when do they ask?
Who or where should a student go to in order to learn more about the resit system?

Are there any guidelines from the college to the students regarding A/AS resits? If yes, what are they? How are they distributed? (intranet? documents? general briefing?)
Is there any standardized/common understanding among teachers as regards to students resitting AS/A2 exams? (e.g. any limit on resits? who to decide?)

Do you receive any information or keep any sort of records or statistics about students resitting?

Advice to students

What do you think is the reason why so many students resit?

Many students think that AS is much harder than GCSE and then A2 is even harder? What is your view about this?

What are the college's guidelines to you, as a subject teacher, as to how to advise the students on resits? (written? in class? individually?)

Generally speaking, what is your reason for advising your students to resit or not to resit? How strong do you think is a teacher's influence on students' resit decision?

How do you keep track of your student's performance? What sort of system do you use? Is it based on GCSE results? Do you think it is a good prediction? Is it possible to change the target grade, say, during the course, you found the student capable of a higher grade? How?

Do you talk to your students about the target grades? What effect do you think it has on the students? How important are the target grades in terms of students' decision whether to resit or not? Some mention the significance of UMS points in resit decisions. What is your view?

Do you actively tell students to resit if you think they ought to? Do you explain to them your rationale? What is the usual rationale? Who do you think make (or have the most influence on) the decision: the teacher, student or the student's parent?

Personal views

Personally, how do you see resits? Good system, bad system, fair, not fair? Why?

How do you find the modular system in general? If you have to choose between the modular system or a terminal system at the end of Year 13, which one would you prefer as a good way for the students to learn and to assess them?

What is your view about the effect of knowing about resit opportunities on the students' attitude towards learning? Any difference? How?

What do you think are the effects of resits in preparing students for higher education or adult life (e.g. taking second chances in life)?

Do you want the current system to continue?

Parents

Do you talk to the parents if you feel that a student needs to resit but he/she does not want to?
What is mostly discussed in the parents evenings for sixth-formers?

What do you think parent's attitudes generally are towards resits (do they encourage or discourage them)?

Do you think fees are a matter of concern for the parents?

UCAS

What is your involvement with UCAS forms (such as writing subject reference reports)?
What is your college's practice about certificating AS results at the end of Year 12, (any difference in practice if the students continue the subject into A2)?

How do you advise the students as what to put on their UCAS forms about their result if they were to resit it? Do you tell them to indicate that they will be resitting or leave it out?

What is the practice of your college regarding resits on the students' appraisal forms?
Do you think universities take into account of whether students have taken resits? Why?

Preparation for resits

How do you prepare your students for resitting exams?
What kind of help? Any revision sessions or clinics?
Are these done in class or outside? During the frees? Optional for students?
Are they free or fee-charging?

What is your college's general practice in terms of preparing the students for exams?
Do you use past exam papers, examiners' reports or mark schemes? How do you use them?
Do you think it's important for the students to practice for the exam using exam documents?

Reports suggest that students on average improve in resits (an average of 15-25 UMS marks according to QCA). What do you think is the reason behind this improvement?

What is your view about some reports saying that A-level results are getting better because students are allowed to resit without any penalty?

What is your view about the standards of questions at the AS or A2 level?
Do you think they relate well to what the curriculum is or how you want the subject to be learnt? Do you think they are sufficiently challenging?
What about their ability to discriminate between top and bottom students (a wide range)?

Do you think awarding bodies have done enough to make their practice sufficiently transparent, such as publishing examiners' reports, past papers, marking schemes?

Do you contribute to any of that work, such as marker, examiner, question setter, etc.? Do you know if many of your colleagues do?

Do you think there is a resit culture in A levels in general?

Teaching

Generally speaking, do you think teachers teach to the exam at A levels?

Do you think you have enough freedom as to how you want to teach the subject?
Generally speaking, what do you think is most important in teaching the students in sixth-form?
What is your view about the resources you have from your college in terms of teaching your students the way you want them to learn?

What do you think are your students' expectation from you in learning the subject?
How do you promote your subject, in terms of making it interesting to the students?

What is your view about the suggestion that the A levels have become too exam-driven?

What do you want the students to get from you and the college regarding the subject you have taught them when they leave college?

How do you think the resit system has helped or hindered you and your colleagues in teaching sixth-form students?

Finally, are there any questions or any other things you want to talk about regarding the resit system in general?

Thank you.

Interview Schedule

Basic Schedule for College Managers

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.

First, very briefly, can you please tell me what your role is in the college?
How does the system work between you and subject teachers, departments, tutors, etc.?

College's policy

What is your college's policy on students resitting AS/A2 exams?
Do you set any limit on resits? Who makes the decisions?

When do the students start taking their first AS exams in your college? January or June in Year 12? Is it a general policy for all subjects or just for some? What is the rationale?

I assume that teaching of a unit or module has completed before students take their exam; what do you think about the time for teaching (sufficient or not; same for every student)?
Do you think it is better for the students to take the resits in June or January?

Do you think some teachers use the January exams as mocks?
Is it common for students who took their first exams in January and then re-take them in June in Year 12?

What is the general practice about resits in terms of teachers approaching the students actively about resits or the students to decide for themselves?

Does the college keep some sort of records or statistics about A levels resits?
Who gets them and what do they use them for?

Knowledge about resits

When are students first told about the possibility to resit? (start of Year 12?)
Are there any special briefing of students about A level exams and resits?

Who or where should a student go to learn more about the resit system?
Are there any written guidelines to the students regarding A/AS resits? If yes, what are they?
How are they distributed and when?

Do you think it is important for students to know how the resit system works before they make their resit decisions?

Advice to students

What are the college's guidelines to tutors and subject teachers as to how to advise the students on resits? (written? in class? individually?)
Are there standard guidelines applicable to all subjects?
Do you think your teachers have a good understanding of the modular resit system, say, its benefits and how it works?

Do you think generally speaking, the advice for students to resit is based on what the teachers think they are capable of or what the students need?
Does the college give the students a target grade or a minimum grade for each subject? What is it based on(their GCSE results)? What system do you use?

Do subject departments or teachers discuss among themselves individual students' results and whether they should resit or not? What is the approach generally?

Does the college pay for any resits at all? Are there any special circumstances whereby the college will pay (e.g. if the result improves)?

Parents

What is the general policy of the college in terms of involving parents in sixth-form education, in particular, about A level exams?

Do form tutors or teachers talk to the parents if they feel that a student needs to resit but he/she does not want to?

Are there any guidelines, information leaflet, for parents? Do they include a section on exam timetables and resit opportunities?

Personal views

Personally, how do you see resits? Good system, bad system, fair, not fair? Why?

How do you find the modular system in general?
If you have to choose between the modular system or a terminal system at the end of Year 13, which one would you prefer as a good way for the students to learn and to assess them?

What is your view about the effect of knowing about resit opportunities on the students' attitude towards learning? Any difference? How?

What do you think are the effects of resits in preparing students for higher education or adult life (e.g. taking second chances in life)?
Do you want the current system to continue?

UCAS

What is your college's practice about certificating AS results at the end of Year 12, (any difference in practice if the students continue the subject into A2)?

What is the college's advice/guidelines to students as to what to put down on their UCAS forms regarding AS results and resits?
Do you tell them to indicate that they will be resitting or leave it out?
Is it uniform or up to individual tutors/teachers?

What is the practice of your college regarding resits on the students' appraisal forms?
Do you think universities take into account of whether students have taken resits? Why?

Preparation for resits

What is the college's policy or guidelines for subject teachers in preparing the students for the resits?
In general, how does the college help students revise or prepare for the resits or is it up to individual teachers?
Are there any organized or coordinated revision sessions or clinics for students resitting?
Are these done in class or outside? During the frees? Optional for students?
Are they free or fee-charging?

What is the general practice in the college in terms of preparing the students for exams, such as doing past exam papers, reading the examiners' reports or mark schemes?

Do you think it's important for the students to practice for the exam using exam documents?

Teaching

Generally speaking, do you think teachers teach to the exam?
Did any of your teachers complain about resits affecting their teaching of A2? How?

Reports suggest that students on average improve in resits (an average of 15-25 UMS marks according to QCA). What do you think is the reason behind this improvement?

What is your view about some reports saying that A-level results are getting better because students are allowed to resit without any penalty?
Do you think there is a resit culture in A levels in general?

Review by the QCA has shown that students improve an average of 15-25 UMS marks by resitting. What do you think is the reason for the improvement?
What works this time but not the first time?

What is your view about the suggestion that the A levels have become too exam-driven?
Do you think the culture in sixth-form in your college has become more of an exam culture as opposed to learning culture?

Other activities

What is your view about extracurricular activities or voluntary work in sixth-form education? Do you think they are important? How do you advise your students to balance between these activities and their studying?

Do you think that these activities have taken a back seat with students focusing on sitting and resitting exams?

In what way do you think the resit system has affected your students in your sixth-form education?

Generally speaking, what do you think is important in educating the students in sixth-form? What do you want your students to get from you and the college when they leave?

How do you think the resit system has helped or hindered you and your colleagues in educating sixth-form students?

Finally, are there any questions or any other things you want to talk about regarding the resit system in general?

Thank you.

Interview Schedule

Basic Schedule for University Admissions Tutors

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.

May I start by asking you to describe your role as an admissions tutor for your department?

Policy in admissions

What is the main factor in your department's admissions considerations?
(Is it largely based on predicted results in A levels, interviews, your own test, or reference?)

How do you use the applicant's exam results? Do you consider the AS results they have completed or mainly their A level predictions? Do you consider the GCSE results?

What do you use or look for in short-listing applicants for the next round or making offers?
Do you interview all applicants?
How important are the other factors (as extra-curricular activities, personal statements) in the admissions selections?

Do you think A levels are a good predictor for university education?

The UCAS form

Some schools say they do not certificate results in Year 12. Students would put their A-level results as pending and only write down their predictions in the school reference.
Does your university ask for information in addition to those given on the UCAS form, such as UMS scores in AS modules?

Generally, do you find the schools' reports or predicted results reliable and trustworthy?

How do you find the quality of the personal statements or appraisals in general?

Resits and A levels

How does your department view applicants who have taken resits?

From the students' responses to my questionnaire, many students think that universities do not care about students resitting because it is the final result that counts.
Is that the case with your department and what is your views about it?

What is your concern, if any, about results which were achieved through resits?
Do you think there should be a limit to the number of resits an A-level student can take?

Sixth-form education

What is your view about public exams being very transparent these days?
What do you think is the effect of transparency on student learning?
What is you view about the suggestion that sixth-form education may have become too exam driven?

What do you think is the objective of sixth-form education?
What role do you think A levels play in that?
What role do you think resits play in sixth-form education?

What is your view about some reports suggesting that A-level results are getting better because students are allowed to resit without penalty?

What qualities do you want to see in the students admitted to your course after sixth-form?
How does the calibre of students admitted under the current exam system compared to your expectation?
What do you think are the characteristics of A-level students in terms of their learning ability and skills?

Repeaters and resitters

In general, repeaters are not viewed favourably. I am talking about people who resit A levels after the 2-year course.
What is the general practice in your department regarding repeater applicants?
How do you view the difference between resitting within the two years of sixth-form and repeating after the two-year course?

University's own practice

Do you allow your undergraduates any resit opportunities?
What is your view about giving students second chances?

Personal views

Do you think the resit system of A levels is fair? Do you want it to continue?

Do you think the current resit system in A levels has in any way helped or hindered you as a university admissions tutor for one of the top universities for selection purposes?

Finally, are there any questions or any other things you want to talk about regarding the resit system in general?

Thank you.

Appendix 15

An example of the interview transcript

At the beginning of each transcript, the name (code or fictitious name) of the interviewee, date and time of the interview and which round of interview (only for student interviews) were entered for identification purposes.

The text of speech was indented after each speaker to make easy reading. Sequential numbering was used in the transcript for reference and to aid access to the interview data. Instead of the common practice of numbering the lines in the transcript, I used a sequential number preceding my text of speech since there were only two persons in each interview (me, the interviewer, and the interviewee).

The format is illustrated in the following example (G is the code for George, a fictitious name of one of the student interviewees):

George, 1st interview, 25 November 2008, 10:30-11:10 am, Room 1, library, FE College

1: Can you tell me the reason why you continued into sixth form after GCSE?

G: Umm, I want--, I plan to go to university and so I need to get A levels to get into university I want to go to, so, yeah.

2: Why do you want to go to university?

G: To earn some money really, and.. well, also like, sociable. I want to go to a big university for social reasons, it should be good fun.

3: How do you find A levels compared to GCSE so far?

G: It's a lot harder and more work.. and it's good because the students don't muck around in lessons whereas in GCSE, it's much less focused on work.

Appendix 16

A summary of some of the nodes and tree nodes used in the interview data coding

Tree nodes	**Resit decision**	**Sixth-form education**	**Goal**	**Exam effects**	**Revision process**	**The A-level system**	**Resit system**	**University**	**Parents**
Nodes	exam planning	harder than GCSE	university	exam pressure	timing	modular approach	knowledge about resits	selection criteria	relationship
	resit reasons	culture	career development	exam techniques	revision notes	exam transparency	teachers' support	predicted grades	advice to students
	parents' influence	teacher-student relationship	parents' expectations	exam planning	marking schemes	exam as a way to learn	college's policy or guidelines	competition	education background
	teachers' advice	responsibility	motivation	teaching to the exam	past papers	easier exams due to resits	unlimited rule	A levels as predictor	expectations
	resit timing	choice of subjects	personal development	learning strategy	revision strategy	AS easier than A2	fair or not	student standards	support or pressure
	resit strategy	target grades	achievement target	positive effects on learning	revision sessions/ clinics	terminal exam better or worse	system to continue or not	university's own resit policy	exam fees
	need or ability	educational aspects	resits help or not	A2 study	teacher's help	purpose of A levels	helpful to students	students' expectations	
	exam fees	exam timetable		target grades	A2 study	exam culture	helpful to college	university's expectations	
		learning needs		exam feedback	study leave			role of A levels	
		role of A levels		disruption to lessons					

Appendix 17

Working template
for the analysis of students' learner identity and approaches to resits

Name (fictitious name) of student:

College:

Overall impression:

Questionnaire responses:

Exam results:

GCS:
AS levels:
Subjects taken at A levels:

Knowledge about resits:

How many correct answers:
Source of information:

Resits:

Subject (how many units resitting):
Reasons for resitting:

Resit decision:

Resit decision: easy or hard? (include ratings of individual factors)
Timing: when decided

Advice from teacher:

Description of teacher's advice:
Discussion with parents:
Reasons for talking or not talking to parents:

Factors considered in resit decision:

What factors were the most/least important:

Universities:

Rating of factors they think will be considered by universities:
Reasons for thinking universities care or not care about resits:

Rating of each aspect of education:

Ratings of individual aspects of education:
What were the most/least important aspects:

Results and offers (from interview)

Resit results:

Conditional offers received:
Final outcome of A-level results (email message):

Interviews:

Personal qualities

Description of themselves as students/learners:
Why continued into sixth-form:
Learning strategy:
Resit strategy:
Reason for underperformance in the earlier attempts:
Resit preparation:

Views and reflection on resit decision

First interview:
Second interview:
Third interview:

Relationship with teachers

How did they find the teachers' teaching:
How important were the teachers in helping them learn or prepare for exam:
Teacher's support in resit decision:
Teacher's support in resit preparation:

Parents

Relationship with parents:
Education level of parents:
Advice from parents on education and resits:

About the system

Views about the modular approach:
Views about the resit policy:
Social and extracurricular activities

Type of activities:

Views about their importance:
Reflection on resit experience
Was the resit a right decision:
What would they have done differently?:
The effects of resits on their sixth-form education:

Outlook:

What they intended to do (more resits in June)?:
Outlook for the remaining months:
Overall views about the two years of sixth-form education:

Appendix 18

Method of indication of the source of each quotation in the report

1. The source of each quotation is given at the end of the quotation.

2. ***Quotations from questionnaire responses***

The student's identity code is given in brackets at the end of the quotation.

Example:

A student who hasn't taken resits might be more impressive. (2018)

The prefix in the code indicates the student's college:
2=Sixth-Form College; 3= FE College; 4=Independent College

3. ***Quotations of teachers, college managers and university admissions tutors***

(each of them was interviewed once)

At the end of the quotation, the interviewee's identity code is followed by a number(s) indicating the serial number(s) of the interview exchange in the transcript.

College managers are identified by their college (SF-College, FE-College or IND-College). Teachers are identified by their subject (Psychology, Maths or PE). University admissions tutors are identified by their course (Medicine, Computer Science or Social Work).

Examples:

I want them to be well-rounded individuals in a wider sense who will make contributions to society down the line. (IND-College:74)

It's much better, much harder as well…. because now you have to really know and understand it which, if they're going to university, it's much better, much more prepared. (Psychology:58,60)

I'm not sure how valid they are as a real measure of somebody's attainment. (Social Work:36)

4. ***Quotations of students (each student was interviewed three times)***

The student's identity (a fictitious name) is followed by a number indicating which of the three interviews the quotation was taken from; this is then followed by another number(s) indicating the serial number(s) of the interview exchange in the transcript.

Examples*:*

Everyone realizes that you can just retake and retake, they don't wholeheartedly work so hard in their first go because it doesn't matter that much. (Michelle:1:25)

I learned how to get marks basically, like using big words in English. I learned it from my teachers…. I mean A levels is about getting the marks, isn't it? It's about showing what you know to the people in the exam. (Doris:2:36,37)

5. ***Symbols used in the quotations***

As shown from the examples above, some symbols are used in the interview quotations. Symbols are used in interview transcripts to simulate the transcript to the live exchange (see Chapter 4). The symbols used in this research are repeated below for ease of reference.

Table 4.2: Symbols used in interview transcripts and in quotations in the report

	Symbol	Meaning	Usage
Symbols* used in the transcripts	.. …	Short pauses Medium or long pauses	Indicates pauses in the speech; usually it shows that the interviewee found the question difficult to answer or wanted more time to think before answering.
	[ ]	Speech overlap	Indicates words spoken while the other person was still speaking; it usually shows impatience of the interviewee or incidence when the interviewee thought of something and wanted to say it immediately, hence the interruption.
	( )	Non-verbal expressions	Inserted in brackets, these include short laughter, sighs, etc.
	- --	Incomplete word Truncated intonation	The interviewee started a word or a projected intonation unit but abandoned it before finishing; it usually shows less-straightforward answers and the interviewee was still thinking about it when he/she started answering.
	Punctuations	Intonation contours	Some interviewees could talk for a long time without a full stop (finality), so plenty of commas (non-finality).
Symbols used in the quotations in the report	….	Omission of some texts	Parts of the speech (either repetitive or irrelevant to the purpose of the quotation) were omitted in the quotation.
	(( ))	Author's descriptions rather than transcriptions	Words inserted (not part of the speech) to show the context of the point(s) made in the quotation.

*Source: Chafe (1993); Du Bois et al. (1993)

Appendix 19

Interview exchange showing Aaron's lack of understanding of the modular resit system

The following is an interview exchange at the first interview between Aaron and the researcher about Aaron's views on examinations in sixth-form education. It shows Aaron's muddled logic and lack of analytical skills. The number preceding the text indicates a question in sequence by the interviewer (researcher) in the interview.

87: What is your view about the modular system in A levels? Do you prefer this to a terminal-exam system which has exams only at the end?

Aaron: I think they should not have AS levels and just have the whole thing as one A levels like we did in GCSE when we did two years of work: Year 10, Year 11, and then you did your exams. I think they should be like that again because.. you have the kind of exams in January and then you are trying to do work as well alongside it. It's quite a hard thing to do, so I think they should do just one collective exam in the second year at the end and test your knowledge after two years.

88: But if you only have one exam at the end, it would mean that you can't resit within the two years. Is that alright?

Aaron: Umm... maybe I think.. maybe break it up into modules at different points, so yeah, you'll be tested in certain modules at points then you have a chance like we're doing with AS levels because like I am retaking a couple of modules instead of redoing the whole thing. So, it's split up so you can retake and add your marks to the other exams, because then that'll give you a chance to resit, as we do. But I reckon at the end, you'd just do a collective one exam or something along with the modules or something like that. I can't comprehend things but I just, I don't think there is the need to do exam, exam, exam, and that's a bit too much really.

89: So, you want a modular system so you can retake some of the units but you prefer one big exam at the end. Is that what you are saying?

Aaron: Yes, just like one big exam at the end, but with resits.

Remarks: Aaron was not the only student in the study who had a poor understanding of the rationale behind the modular system. A number of students interviewed thought that the modular approach was there solely to give students more attempts at the examination.